

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **Bisexuality: An Exploration of Women's Relationships**

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*Award date:*  
2015

*Awarding institution:*  
University of Roehampton

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# **Bisexuality: An Exploration of Women's Relationships**

**A Constructivist Grounded Theory**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of PsychD Counselling Psychology

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2014

## Abstract

This research study explored how women construct meanings out of their bisexual experiences in their relationships. Using a constructivist grounded theory methodology and methods, data was collected through intensive interviewing from nine participants. The participants had all been in at least one intimate and sexual relationship with partners of multiple genders. The data analysis resulted in the emergence of three main categories. Category one, *spatial negotiation of sexual self*, reflects primarily the process of moving from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identification. The second category, *prism of experiences; refractions through another*, portrays how women understand their sexual, physical and emotional experiences in relation to their partners. The third category, *techniques of the relationship*, represents the process resulting in the participants' current preferences for bisexual partners. These three categories were integrated by examining the relations, intersections and interactions amongst them, leading to the identification of the basic social process underpinning the participants' experiences. The occurrence of the basic social process, *spatial negotiation*, was evident in four dimensions: *self-with-self*, *self-with-society*, *self-with-partner*, and *self-with-relationship*. The four dimensions of spatial negotiation explicate the multitude of properties involved in how meanings, behaviours, and actions are constructed and organised in forming relationships. The final theory suggests that women's bisexual experiences in contemporary relationships are constructed within a sphere of spatial negotiations geared towards facilitating the achievement of their desired sexual, emotional and social existence with bisexual partners. This desired state varies individually, yet appears to integrate aspects of visibility, authenticity and belonging based on shared values, beliefs and views with partners.

In light of existing literature indicating a lack of knowledge around bisexuals' relationships by therapists, the theory offers a novel framework that accounts for multiplicity of factors pertinent to the construction of meanings in bisexual women's relationships, which may be utilised by counselling psychologists as a guide to assist them in working with clients. Therefore, the implications anticipate a method that therapists may consult for abetting the facilitation of spatial negotiations, which in return can empower bisexual women through their relationships.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I am greatly thankful to my supervisor Dr Lyndsey Moon and Director of Studies Dr

Diane Bray for their continuous encouragement and support.

A special thank you for the participants who have given of their time to share their  
personal and intimate accounts.

Above all I am immensely grateful for my family who has believed in me and  
supported me throughout this whole journey.

## Chapter I: Introduction

An electronic search of the terms “bisexuality or bisexual or bisexuals” in the British journal of ‘Counselling Psychology Quarterly’ yielded eight results covering the period between 1988 and December 2014. Out of these eight publications, none was specific to bisexuality only. Seven of the studies grouped lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people together, and one grouped bisexual and homosexual men together. The discipline of Counselling Psychology can be traced back to 1982 making it a relatively young profession (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010), however, whether this accounts for the absolute dearth of literature on bisexuality in a UK counselling psychology journal is questionable. Moreover, this relatively small number of bisexual related studies in the UK becomes more questionable when compared to a similar search in the American journal ‘The Counseling Psychologist’ which yields 262 results. Yet, the majority of studies in both journals group bisexuals with lesbians and gays illustrating one of the primary concerns around bisexual invisibility that will be discussed shortly.

Research has continuously reported that the majority of therapists have received minimal training on sexuality issues contributing to their incapacity to work with individuals from sexual minority groups (Coyle, Milton, & Annesley, 1999; Evans, 2003; Grove, 2009). In addition, the unique experiences of bisexuals have been brushed over in the research literature, partly due to their invisibility even within sexual minority groups, further reinforcing their invisibility in the psychological therapies<sup>1</sup> (Klesse, 2010; Petford, 2003). For instance, the grouping of bisexuals with

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<sup>1</sup>‘Psychological therapies’ is the term chosen in the research to encompass all therapeutic disciplines and models. When referring to a specific approach or discipline, the name will be provided accordingly. Example: Counselling Psychology.

lesbians and gays in the journal of 'Counselling Psychology Quarterly' and 'The Counseling Psychologist' attest to this invisibility.

The invisibility of bisexuality in the research literature compounded by therapists lack of awareness on bisexuality issues, constitute two primary issues that form the stepping-stone for the area of study. Chapter one provides an overview of these matters followed by the reasons for choosing to investigate bisexual women's relationships. Furthermore, the rationale behind the way the literature review was conducted in relation to the chosen methodology, grounded theory, is presented. The chapter closes by introducing a concise overview of the remaining chapters establishing the thesis.

### **1.1 The broad area of study**

The concept(s) of bisexuality has been produced, reproduced, and studied in the last century from multiple perspectives, resulting in vast literature across disciplines such as anthropology, history, sociology, sexology, psychiatry and psychology (Fox, 1996; Storr, 1999). More recently, bisexuality as a concept in Western culture has been used in attempts at furthering knowledge and understandings of sex, gender, sexuality and/or sexual orientation (Angelides, 2001; Diamond, 2008; Firestein, 1996). In light of its historical evolution, which will be discussed in detail in chapter two, the word bisexual has come to denote multiple connotations, which at times overlap or are used interchangeably (Hemmings, 2002; Klesse 2011). This has resulted in problems for individuals identifying as bisexual with implications extending into their relationships (Klesse, 2011; Rust 1996).

Research shows that bisexual individuals face stigmatisation, marginalisation and rejection from heterosexuals and homosexuals making their experiences further

distinct from gays and lesbians (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009). This dual-found stigmatisation, referred to as binegativity, is associated with stereotypes of bisexuals as promiscuous, unstable and having an illegitimate sexual identity, which has been associated with bisexuals' experiencing higher levels of psychological distress (ibid). One of the primary reasons behind bisexuals' invisibility resides within the society's dominant conceptualisation of a dichotomous sexuality, and the contingency of one's sexual identity on their partner's gender (Hartman-Linck, 2014; Klesse, 2011). Bisexual individuals are attracted to people of same and different sexes and/or genders. This implies that their intimate and sexual relationships could take different forms depending on their partner(s)' sex and/or gender, as well as the number of partners they are involved with (Klesse, 2011; Rust, 1996). Hence, bisexuals who are in monogamous relationships with the same-sex partner or with different-sex partner are assumed to be either straight or gay (Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; Ochs, 2009; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). In return, a significant amount of the literature<sup>2</sup> specific to bisexuals' relationships appears to be dedicated to studying the impacts of binegativity on relationships.

## **1.2 The research aims**

As a trainee counselling psychologist who set out to study bisexual women's relationships using a constructivist grounded theory methodology, the aim was to produce novel knowledge in the field of counselling psychology, while extending existing knowledge in this area. Rather than focusing on gender and sexuality to understand relationships, as many studies have done (cited in chapter two), the focus

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<sup>2</sup> The studies are cited in chapter 2

in this research was given to intimate and sexual relationships in aim of shedding light on aspects of the individual's constructions of meanings within the relationship. In addition, by using grounded theory methods to generate a theory (Charmaz, 2006) on bisexuals' relationships, the aim was to provide a possible alternative and/or novel framework emerging from the data, rather than rely on existing heterosexual and homosexual frames of reference in understanding bisexuals' relationships. This is of particular significance for counselling psychologists who have often been trained in an overall heteronormative set of theories, such as in child development (Burman, 1994). Therapists' narratives through their training are set within a binary system in relation to gender and sexuality (Moon, 2008) that may limit their ability to understand other narratives such as those within bisexuality discourses. A framework emerging from bisexuals' experiences may offer a new narrative that therapists can draw on in understanding bisexuals' relationships.

### **1.3 Positioning the researcher within the research study**

There is a common belief that researchers, whether consciously or not, choose to study areas that bear personal significance to them. A compilation of factors led to my interest in this field, however, being aware of how my experiences may impact on the research beyond the choice of subject, I began engaging with reflexive thinking early in the research process.

The initial reasons leading to my interest in the area of bisexuality were personal and professional experience, while the specific research question was the result of reviewing the literature in this field and identifying a gap. As a woman who has been in relationships with men and women, and although I do not use the term bisexual to identify my sexuality, I have experienced varied reactions from straight

men and lesbian partners to my bisexual experiences. This naturally made me wonder about others' experiences and the underlying assumptions about bisexuals. In addition, and while undertaking a placement over two years at a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) charity organisation I never encountered a bisexual client, which led me to wonder about the possible reasons behind this. Overall my involvement with the bisexual community was limited to my professional experience as a trainee counselling psychologist while I worked at the LGBT placement. Thus, my views, assumptions and opinions on bisexuality and bisexual individuals encompassed my personal experiences and counselling knowledge on LGBT issues, which was predominantly on lesbians and gays.

Bisexuality researchers warn against the tendency to conduct research with the expectations that participants' experiences will support the researchers' (Barker et. al., 2012). Consequently, they highlight the importance of reflexivity when the researcher shares certain aspects and experiences with the people they are researching (ibid). After conducting my preliminary literature review on bisexuality and bisexuals' relationships, I began taking pre-emptive measures, such as writing reflexive memos (Birks & Mills, 2011) in order to ensure that I remain aware of how my experiences and assumptions may infiltrate into my research design, data collection and analysis. Also, to refrain from seeking data that aimed at supporting my views. Some of the measures taken based on these reflections are presented in chapters two, three and four. In the final chapter of the thesis a more comprehensive account on reflexivity is provided incorporating aspects from the whole research process.

#### 1.4 Grounded theory and the literature review

As a doctoral research student, a research proposal containing a literature review was required for approval by the university prior to endeavouring on the research journey. However, once I had identified grounded theory methodology and methods, a dilemma arose regarding the literature review. Classical grounded theorists argue that the literature review should be conducted once the analysis is completed (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Their reasoning for this argument is that the researcher may end up selecting data for the categories that have already been determined by other theories, thus hindering the emergence of new theories by forcing the data into pre-existing categories (ibid). The literature in grounded theory is significant during all stages of the study, and commonly used as a source for theoretical codes, a sensitising tool for comparative analysis in order to enhance theoretical sensitivity, and as data in analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011; Morse, 2007). Charmaz (1990) argues that the delay of the literature does not imply disregarding it, however, it increases the chances of the researcher's creativity in interpreting the data, and once categories begin to develop then the literature is used to compare them with existing theories and concepts.

Other grounded theorists argue that a literature review prior to beginning the research study is essential in order to understand and recognise existing knowledge in the field of investigation as means of alerting the researcher to gaps (Morse, 2007). Similarly, some theorists who recognise that formal proposals are sometimes prerequisites to undertaking a research study, suggest that a limited and purposive preliminary literature review sufficient to meet requirements can be effective in

directing the researcher to the field by providing an indication of the extent of current theories and research (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart, 2007).

Therefore, the literature review for this study was divided into two main sections: a preliminary literature review and a comparative literature review. The preliminary review comprising chapter two was conducted for this study once the broad area of investigation was identified in order to formulate the research question, provide a background of the theories and previous research in the field, and postulate the rationale for the choice of research topic, methodology and methods (Ridley, 2008). Furthermore, the literature was used during the analysis phase as a comparative method and sensitising tool and is discussed in chapters five and six.

### **1.5 Outline of Chapters**

This research study illustrates the systemic, methodical and logical process of inquiry used to address the primary research question: how do women construct meaning of their 'bisexual' experiences in the context of their relationships? As a result of personal interest in the field, professional experience, and identifying a gap in the area, I developed the research question with the aim of producing novel knowledge that would bare a significant contribution to the area of bisexuality and more particularly to Counselling Psychologists. The thesis is divided into six chapters.

Chapter I briefly presented the area of investigation for the research study and how it was chosen. In addition, the lack of literature on bisexuality in general and bisexuals' relationships particularly in the field of counselling psychology was alluded to illustrating the significance of this research for the discipline. This importance is further supported by studies showing the invisibility and binegativity



experienced by bisexuals, which appears to be perpetuated in counselling and therapy by the lack of knowledge and training in this area. Finally, and as means of introducing the next chapter, the issue of conducting a literature review in grounded theory was presented.

Chapter II provides the preliminary literature review, which forms the basis for how a gap in the field was identified leading to the research question. The chapter includes an historical overview from multiple disciplines on bisexuality since the term emerged in the nineteenth century. This overview sets the scene for the several complications inherent in the term bisexuality and the implications this has on individuals who choose to identify as bisexual, and those who don't yet their behaviours and/or emotional and sexual attractions are deemed bisexual. The chapter follows a funnel vision as it gradually narrows down to bisexual specific issues and stereotypes, moving into discussing the literature on bisexuals' relationships. Chapter two ends by providing a critical review of the literature arguing the importance of the research at hand, and also explains how the term 'bisexual' is used in the research.

Chapter III demonstrates the process of choosing a methodology that is suited to investigate the research topic and its relevance to the field of counselling psychology. The rationale and process leading to the choice of using a constructivist grounded theory is provided. This includes why other research paradigms and methodologies were not chosen and how the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, which is adopted, goes in hand with the chosen methodology. Moreover, and intertwined throughout the chapter is my position as a researcher and how my ontological and epistemological views have shaped the research design.

Chapter IV begins with the ethical considerations taken prior to commencing the data generation and their management throughout the research process. The

methods of participant recruitment and sampling are illustrated, while providing visual representations of the participants' demographics. The rationale behind the choice of data collection and analysis methods runs throughout the chapter. Under the data analysis, and in preparation for the next chapter, early samples of the analytic methods are provided showing different levels of analysis.

Chapter V consists of the analytic process intertwined with continuing the literature review as a comparative method concurrent with data gathering and analysis. The chapter illustrates the emergence of three primary categories from the data: spatial negotiation of sexual self, prism of experiences; refractions through another, and techniques of the relationship. Each category is presented with the support of extracts from the interviews, while continuously showing the links between the categories that led to the emergence of the final grounded theory. Moreover, the main themes of every category are compared with existing research literature. The constructivist grounded theory is introduced at the end of the chapter and sets the scene for the following chapter.

Chapter VI discusses the findings and explains how certain theoretical literature was used as a sensitising tool in refining the grounded theory. The grounded theory shows how women's bisexual experiences in contemporary relationships are constructed within a sphere of spatial negotiations geared towards achieving their desired sexual, emotional and social existence with bisexual partners.

These constructions are based on the underlying process of spatial negotiation that was identified in all the accounts. The idea of spatial negotiation follows from identifying four levels of negotiation: self-with-self, self-with-society, self-with-partner and finally self-with-relationship. Reflections on the whole research process follows, as well as the limitations of the study. Finally the implications of the

research findings for counselling psychologists are discussed and suggestions for future research offered.

## Chapter II: Preliminary Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a critical review of the literature on bisexuality and bisexuals' intimate and sexual relationships forming the basis for the research question. Through specifying previous research and literature on the chosen subject, a gap in the field was identified upon which the rationale for the choice of methodology and methods was established. In addition, the discussed literature was continuously used as sensitising concepts throughout the analysis by directing the process of analysis into novel ways of exploration as means of refining the theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Exploring the literature on bisexuals' relationships necessitated defining what is meant by bisexuality and who is a bisexual. Since the emergence of the term 'bisexuality' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the present day, several meanings have been attributed to this term complicating its definition and positioning it in an ambiguous place as a sexual identity and/or sexual orientation (Klesse, 2010, 2011; Storr, 1999). Hence, despite the multitude of definitions provided by theorists, defining bisexuality remains a difficult task within the literature (Eadie, 1993; Klesse, 2010). Furthermore, bisexuality has been described as having a 'double history': one focusing on the emergence, evolution and utilisation of the word, and the other revolving around the previous and current presence of humans desiring both women and men (Eadie, 1993). Other theorists have described the term bisexual as denoting both a political and academic history (Callis, 2012).

Accordingly, the chapter begins with an overview of the history on bisexuality elucidating the intricate process of the term's development since its emergence,

moving onto the implications this has had on bisexuals and consequently on their intimate and sexual relationships. Finally, by providing a critical review of the literature and identifying a gap, I argue that more research on bisexual women's relationships is required.

## **2.2 Bisexuality: An historical overview from multiple perspectives**

### *2.2.1 Bisexuality in Sexology*

Biological theories of sexuality have been traced to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the word 'sexuality' was first associated with types of attractions and/or people (Bristow, 1997; Fox 1996). As a product of psychiatric reasoning of the time, sexuality emerged as concept distinct from gender and sex (Davidson, 1987). In light of this historical emergence of sexuality, Angelides (2001) argues that the labelling of sexuality was a consequence of an ontological identity marking the shift of medical theory from sex and sexual inversion to sexuality and sexual object choice (ibid). This resulted in the early positioning of bisexuality at the core of theorising sexuality and will be illustrated throughout this section.

The word 'bisexuality' first surfaced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was first used to denote the presence of male and female biological sexes within a species, or the overlap of female and male characteristics in one body (Bowie, 1992; Storr, 1997, 1998). On the other hand, one of the earliest pioneers on sexuality, Ellis (1905/1942), who believed that all sexual behaviour had a biological basis, described cases of women and men who were sexually attracted to both female and male partners as 'psychosexual hermaphroditism' (Weeks, 1977, 1989). However, over time Ellis began using the term 'bisexuality' to also cover an individual's sexual desire and

attractions for both males and females, leaving the term 'psychosexual hermaphroditism' behind (Storr, 1999).

Kraft-Ebing (1886/1965) another sexologist of the time argued that bisexuality was the basis for the development of monosexuality (Angelides, 2001), and viewed bisexuals as 'psychical hermaphrodites' (Angelides, 2006). This view underlined the sexual evolution model describing bisexuality as the psychological development parallel to the hermaphroditic primitive state that the human species evolved from into today's gendered physical form (Fox, 1995).

By the early twentieth century, the term 'bisexuality' had become popularly used to describe monosexual development (Angelides, 2006; Storr, 1999). This marked a "developmental evolutionary paradigm" positioning bisexuality "at the threshold of the process of speciation itself, serving as the theoretical link between sex/gender and sexuality" (Angelides, 2001, p. 38). Consequently, sexologists' defining of bisexuality as an infantile and primitive state repudiated the possibility of bisexuality as an adult identity (ibid).

### 2.2.2 *Bisexuality in early Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry*

Sigmund Freud (1905/1953, 1933/1953) has been perceived as one of the most significant originators in theories of sexuality in which bisexuality took a central place (Angelides, 2001). Similar to sexologists of the time, such as Ellis and Kraft-Ebing, in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' Freud first describes bisexuality under the sexological notion of a single body combining male and female characteristics (Bowie, 1992). Freud (Freud, 1905/1953, 1933/1953) argued that there is a 'bisexual predisposition' in humans from which both heterosexuality and homosexuality then develop. He also refers to bisexuality as a mixture of masculinity

and femininity (ibid), yet without clarification of what the terms encompass. On the other hand, Freud's approach to sexuality differed from his contemporaries as he attempted to explain sexual identification beyond the dominant binary discourse (Angelides, 2001). Diverging from Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, although viewing bisexuality in terms of masculinity and femininity, stressed their existence within the psyche and bisexuality as the balance created between the two, rather than being a sexual drive. Thus, Jung's ideas created another view on bisexuality, which has contributed to current confusions between bisexuality and androgyny (George, 1993).

Wilhelm Stekel developed Freud's ideas on bisexuality, but diverted significantly from Freud's views (Garber 1995). Stekel (1920/1950) argued that all humans are bisexual innately, and homosexuality and heterosexuality as monosexualities are unnatural as they both repress one side of sexuality. His view entails that bisexuality is the combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality rather than femininity and masculinity (ibid). Similar to Stekel, although decades later, Valverde (1985) discusses bisexuality in terms of heterosexuality and homosexuality, never the less she argues against the notion of everyone being bisexual. Valverde further suggests a view of sexual orientation as a non-fixed core identity encompassing positive choices and changes without necessarily dismissing differences between sexual orientations.

On the other hand, Rado, a post-Freudian in the 1940's, refuted bisexuality, and was one of the primary figures in the development of homophobic discourse in psychoanalysis (Angelides, 2001). By constructing psychoanalytic theory of homosexuality underpinned by environmental factors, and rejecting the Freudian concept of bisexuality, the result was concealing the inconsistencies associated with

sexuality and gender that Freud had revealed, and reinforcing the separateness of sexuality and gender as oppositional categories (ibid).

Thus, Rado provided the solid scientific ground for the dominant agreement of the aetiology of sexuality in the psychomedical field through rejecting biological bisexuality and constituting theories of sexual deviation. By the 1950's, adaptational psychoanalytic theories were used to classify those individuals as developmentally and psychologically underdeveloped, with psychoanalysis being the curing treatment for their condition (Angelides, 2001). The majority of psychoanalysts in the 1950's and 1960's viewed bisexuals as very disturbed individuals who are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and an inability to choose a 'proper' sexuality (George, 1993).

Bergler, a psychoanalytic psychiatrist, further declared that bisexuality does not exist but as a mere word. Angelides (2001) argued that the refusal of bisexuality was means of securing the boundaries of heterosexuality due to its threatening proximity to bisexuality. Hence, to theorise bisexuality as an intelligible sexual identity would have in return reinstated homosexuality as normal. The implications of these psychoanalytic theories led to classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1952 by the American Psychiatric Association (ibid).

Bisexuality continued to be perceived as scientifically false as a sexuality in the fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis three decades following Freud's death (until 1970's) (Angelides, 2001). Freud's ideas have left their mark and influence on current psychoanalytic theory of sexuality despite the concept remaining ambiguous in many ways (Bowie, 1992). Due to distortions in Freud's theories and the ambiguity around bisexuality, this resulted in a conflation of homophobia and heteronormativity (Angelides, 2001). Although psychoanalysis was separate from biology, it relied heavily upon it with its aim, alongside psychiatry, to become recognised as an



independent science. Thus, this contributed to the production of homosexuality as a psychological condition, which aimed at expanding the powers of the scientific discourse of the time (ibid).

Concurrently in the 1950's with the rise of ego psychology, the replacement of biological bisexuality with environmental psychoanalytic theory omitted the possibility of a psychological bisexuality. Within the discourse of ego psychology bisexuality was used to describe sexual practices under the theory of homosexual neurosis (Angelides, 2001; Fox, 1996). Hence, Freudian and sexological theories of bisexuality as a principle to explain homosexuality shifted into the construction of theories of homosexuality that could account for bisexual behaviour (ibid).

### 2.2.3 *Bisexuality in Psychology*

A radical challenge to the dominant psychoanalytic notions of sexual normality arose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked by Alfred Kinsey's reports on male and female sexuality in 1948 (George, 1993). Kinsey's model of human sexuality represents human fluidity in sexuality based on a continuum from heterosexuality to homosexuality, leaving bisexuality as the term to designate individuals who have both feminine and masculine qualities. However, this had no implications on the anatomical system of having two sexes or being partly male and partly female as biologists have used the term. Kinsey argued that since the term bisexuality emerged from the heterosexual and homosexual terms, it refers to the sex of the partner and does not provide any insight about the bisexual individual (Kinsey et. al., 1948). Kinsey's scale has two different versions that produced the dilemma of whether bisexuality is a representation of the combination of heterosexuality and

homosexuality, or a position between them, one of the main instabilities in the bisexual discourse (Storr, 1999).

Following Kinsey's research, Fritz Klein's work in 'The Bisexual Option' in the 1970's had great influence on the development of the bisexual movement and concept (Storr, 1999). Klein further challenged the dominant psychoanalytic thought and although he viewed bisexuality as a combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality rather than maleness and femaleness or masculinity and femininity, he argued that bisexuality is not concealed homosexuality, or heterosexuality, but a different type of sexual expression (Klein; 1978). This postulated bisexuality as a genuine sexuality with possibility of a psychologically healthy bisexual (George, 1993). In addition, Klein viewed bisexuality as offering greater potential for intimacy based on the individual's ability to be open about their emotional and sexual feelings towards both women and men (ibid). Klein (1978) argued that the "dual sexuality" of the bisexual is threatening to most heterosexuals and homosexuals, which results in their use of denial as defence mechanism to avoid conflict. This he believes is the reason why arguing the non-existence of bisexuals is preferable (Storr, 1999). He further developed the Klein Sexual Orientation grid "in an attempt to better demarcate and understand the complexities of human sexual attitudes, emotions and behaviours" (Klein et. al; 1985, p. 35).

The development of sexuality scales marked further implications upon the conceptualisation of bisexuality (Kessler, 1992). The Klein scale aimed at showing degrees of bisexuality through the use of the continuum, but similar to Kinsey, this positioned bisexuality as falling between the two extremes and interpreted as being both heterosexual and homosexual or neither nor. Klein's model left its mark on many bisexual theorists in sexology and psychology until present and particularly in

the 1990's epistemological debates on bisexuality (Storr, 1999). Kinsey's model and findings from his quantitative research on human sexual behaviour from the 1930's until 1953 also remain extremely influential (Davidson & Layder, 1994; Nardi & Schneider 1998). Storms (1980) on the other hand, who discovered in his research that bisexuals engage in heterosexual and homosexual fantasising as much as homosexuals and heterosexuals, argued that this meant bisexuality incorporates total homosexuality and total heterosexuality, leading him to propose a new scale. The development of these three sexuality scales further added to the complexity of defining and understanding bisexuality (Kessler, 1992).

#### *2.2.4 Summary of historical impacts upon current bisexuality discourses*

Contemporary theorists of bisexuality who have focused on the historical roots and evolution of bisexuality argue the continuous impacts and results of bisexuality's early positioning in the development of today's bisexual epistemologies (Callis, 2012; Hemmings, 2001; Klesse, 2011). Hemmings (2002) states that the early psychoanalytic and sexological texts portrayed bisexuality as "physical or psychical hermaphroditism (Freud), psychical androgyny (Hirschfeld, Weininger), or as the ground from which heterosexual or homosexual adult sexual orientation evolves (Ebing and Ellis)" (p.16). Whereas Stekel's (1920/1950) work in 'Bisexual Love' was the first to address bisexuality directly, yet this remained within a sexed and gendered mixture (Hemmings, 2002). Positioning bisexuality as a stage of developmental maturity, not only resulted in viewing bisexuality as a feature of primitive humans (Storr, 1999), but also removed its right to stand as an independent category or sexuality in its own right (Hemmings, 1995). Callis (2012) argues that in the medical discourse, based on the historical foundations of bisexuality in sexology

and psychoanalysis, bisexuality was never perceived to describe a person, rather as a stage or as a “primordial sexuality”. In addition, Eadie (1993) argues that since sexualities exist in discourses that define any same-sex activity as homosexual and opposite-sex activity as heterosexual, then naturally this excludes the existence of bisexuality as a category. Others contend that due to the non-pathologisation of bisexuality as a sexual identity this has perhaps resulted in the claims of its non-existence (Hemmings, 1995). Despite bisexuality's shift in referring to a sexuality rather than a psychological or anatomical intersexuality, it was still often used in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to denote an individual with perversion and/or primitiveness (Callis, 2012; Storr, 1999).

#### *2.2.5 Emergence of bisexuality politics and identity*

As illustrated previously, bisexuality was not recognised as an identity since its inception, and it wasn't until the 1970's that bisexual identity and politics emerged out of the gay and lesbian, and feminist political movements (Callis, 2012). The bisexual movement arose and began in opposition to the strict identity politics of gay and lesbian groups, and argued for the inclusion of bisexuality in the gay and lesbian communities (Hemmings, 1997). However, it wasn't until the 1990's that more primacy began to be given by scholars to exploring bisexuality as an identity that was constantly overlooked or viewed as a combination of two sexual identities devoid of its own uniqueness (Burrill, 2009).

A few notable studies on bisexuality as an identity, in parallel to the emergence of its politics, include Mead's (1975) research, which explored how social constraints affect bisexual identities and actions. In addition, one of the first ground-breaking research studies on behaviours and identities of self-defined bisexuals was conducted

by Blumstein and Schwartz (1977) in the USA. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 156 people, half men and half women. Their findings showed that over the life span participants' sexual identification and sex-object choice changed in several ways compounded by an unawareness in the individuals' of their abilities to change. They also found that enjoyable sexual experience with both men and women, and emotional responses correlated with adopting a bisexual identity. Besides, they noted the relation between sexual identification and behaviour to other factors such as being in a relationship or part of a community. Overall Blumstein and Schwartz noticed many significant differences between men and women's bisexual behaviour (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977). This accounted for one of the main conclusions showing the complexity in which people define their sexualities and how this defies any classical organisation (ibid). They argued that even the term bisexuality in itself is misleading as it focuses on the choice of sex-object as a middle ground between heterosexuality and homosexuality with an equal erotic disposition towards one gender or the other.

The literature presented in this chapter shows how bisexuality, during its emergence, was supposed to represent a place of sexual differentiation in the development of biological entities (Storr, 1999). Moreover, the term further materialised from a primarily dualistic Western concept of heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only two valid sexual orientations (Weeks, 1990; Bristow, 1997). Hence, the different meanings pertaining to bisexuality have all been built in relation to homosexuality/heterosexuality, male/female or masculine/feminine, a combination or mixture of the two elements, or as a point located somewhere between them (Storr, 1999; Klesse, 2010, 2011). This automatically resulted in the most common definition of bisexuality as either a middle ground between heterosexuality

and homosexuality, or a mixture of both, hence a desire for both men and women (ibid). These arguments form the bulk of the literature upon which current research on bisexuality, and more specifically relationships of bisexuals, rests upon. Presenting this overview is necessary in order to understand the current debates, research and theoretical reasoning on bisexuality, and moving into more contemporary discourses. The following section presents another era in bisexuality's discourse.

## **2.3 Contemporary Bisexuality Discourses**

### *2.3.1 Bisexuality in gender and sexuality epistemologies*

Today, bisexuality has been primarily studied in light of recent sexuality and gender epistemologies (Klesse, 2011) while psychiatry and psychoanalysis no longer dominate discussions of the aetiology of sexuality (Angelides, 2001). These bisexuality theories have their roots in feminist theory, lesbian and gay scholarship, social constructionist and postmodern theory (Callis, 2012). So far I have attempted to provide a succinct overview and concise historical background of bisexuality, forming the rationale behind the currency of its history in present theorising on bisexuality and research on bisexuals' relationships. However, as the domains of sexuality and gender are far too extensive to give justice to within the limited scope of this thesis, I have drawn on the literature that has been most cited and relevant in recent discussions on bisexuality within the fields of gender and sexuality studies.

Due to theorising bisexuality identity within feminist and lesbian and gay theory, and against the backdrop of bisexuality's history in sexology, sociobiology and Freudian psychoanalysis, this has resulted in further placing bisexuality as middle ground in contemporary lesbian feminist and queer political theories (Hemmings,

2002). “In these terrains bisexuality implies transcending dualistic gender and sexual assumptions by exemplifying the privileges of heterosexuality and of queerness” (ibid, p. 100).

This constant questioning of bisexuality became viewed as the clear indication to how it troubles both gender and sexuality binaries (Hemmings, 1997, Callis, 2012). For instance, queer theory has emerged in the social sciences and humanities as an analytical tool in studying sexual identities, yet it has also neglected bisexuality as an identity in its endeavours (Callis, 2012). While some sexuality theorists have argued the distancing between bisexuality and identity, and maintaining its definition to a form of sexuality that deviates from a fixed gender object choice, (Garber, 1995), others have contended that this uncoupling of bisexuality and identity naturally repositions bisexuality as a middle ground or transcending the binarism structures of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Hemmings, 2002). On the other hand some argue that the absence of a leading definition on bisexuality provides it with political strength as this insures the depth and breadth of the identity (Rust, 1996).

Gender and sexuality studies are further located within identity literature and vary in their epistemological and ontological underpinnings. Underlying the controversy around sexuality is the divide between the essentialist and social constructionist philosophical stances. While essentialists believe that inner and inherent biological processes underlie sexuality, in contrast social constructionists argue that sexuality is a construction established via the cultural, social and political systems (Diamond, 2008). Challenging essentialist views, some sexuality theorists, such as Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks, have focused on how sexual identity is created within the wider context of norm constructions, arguing against the concept of categorisation in understanding sexuality (George, 1993). This constructionist view

has been utilised by many contemporary bisexuality theorists in attempts at de-pathologising bisexuality as a non-authentic and transitory identity. A social constructionist perspective views identity as a temporary anchorage or different positioning in a continuously changing sexual scene, which naturally places great importance upon the use of language available for identification, and the specific situations which require an individual to communicate and express a particular identity (Rust, 1996).

In arguing that sexuality, similar to other life aspects, is a social product grounded in its historical context and becoming a social reality through the connections made from past to present, sociologists, Gagnon and Simon (2005) state how Kinsey and Freud had great influence on shaping theoretical models of sexual development, with both sharing a belief in 'biological knowingness', and using biology as means of explaining sexual behaviour and development. Furthermore, they argue that this illustrates how the construction of sexuality and its socialisation is in relation to contemporary interests invented through those connections (ibid). The social reality of sexuality's current status in its contingency upon the previously mentioned historical and cultural moments can be seen in today's discourses of sexuality, including bisexuality. This view has been furthered by poststructuralist theories on identification (Hemmings, 2002) by emphasising that any act of identification is situated and conditioned within its historical context (Hall, 1992, 1996). In return such views de-pathologise identity changes and bisexuality (Klesse, 2010).

In light of poststructuralist views, understanding identification points to the significance of the cultural processes involved in adopting any type of social and sexual identity shaped by the dominant discourses (Howarth, 2000; Howarth &



Stavrakakis, 2000; Laclau, 1990). This view has been used to argue that even if bisexuality as an intelligible identity position exists, the ambiguity inherent in its discourses ultimately affects individuals' identification processes. Hence, identifying as bisexual is continuously undermined by its common perceptions as either a phase or denying a true homosexual identity (Klesse, 2010).

These contemporary views on bisexuality resulted in one of the most currently used definitions of bisexuality understood as “a desire that does not limit itself to the eroticization of one gender; or (...) as a desire that does not discriminate in terms of either gender or the morphology of the sexed body” (Klesse, 2011, p.230). This definition encompasses two primary narratives: one in which bisexuality is a form of desire framed within a dual orientation, desire for men and women, and the other as a desire which does not discriminate in regards to gender, thus reframing bisexuality outside of the sexual and gendered dichotomy (Hemmings, 2002; Rust, 2000). Additionally, this characterisation of bisexuality is based on the concept that femaleness and maleness, or femininity and masculinity, do not encompass all gender identities (Califia, 1997; Nestle et. al., 2002; Whittle, 2002).

### *2.3.2 Effects of bisexuality discourses on individuals*

The historical meanings of bisexuality, despite being somehow conflicting to the current definitions, often still exist side by side in current communications on bisexuality. Consequently, bisexuality remains shrouded in ambiguity and the term does not provide a solid ground for its use as a sexual identity or even sexual orientation in its own right (Adam, 1998; Hemmings, 2002). The prevalent idea that bisexuality cannot be an authentic identity appears to further create nuances in identifying as bisexual (Ault, 1996; Eadie, 1993). For instance, while some self-

identified bisexuals believe that their identification is not dependent on their sexual practices or relationships, others who choose not to identify are often questioned about their sexualities (Klesse, 2007). The lack of a prominent bisexual identity has impacted upon individuals' ability to identify as bisexual due to the uncertainty of what this label implies, hence feeling uncomfortable in adopting it (Ault, 1996; Eadie, 1993). Research shows that the continuous stigmatisation of bisexuality accounts for why many individuals refrain from using it as a sexual identity (Ochs, 1996). A relatively small number of people identify as bisexual in comparison to the much larger number of those who have had sexual experiences with men and women (Fox, 1996; Paul, 1997).

Based on studies showing identity changes in bisexuals, some researchers have argued that in comparison to linear narratives of non-bisexual individuals, bisexuals' narratives show a non-linearity reflecting the discourses of bisexuality in the governing domains of sexuality as a phase and not an identity (Fox, 1996; Rust, 1996). Ellis (2012) contends that the duality in the term bisexual means that an individual would be engaged simultaneously with two persons of the opposite and same sex. The stereotypical belief of bisexuals' non-monogamous lifestyles is hence underpinned by the very definition of bisexuality. Moreover, as non-monogamy is associated in society with promiscuity, bisexual women particularly who are engaged in non-monogamous relationships are then viewed as promiscuous (Klesse, 2011; Ellis 2012). As for bisexuals who are in monogamous relationships, they are seen as either 'in denial' about their true homosexual identity, or as heterosexuals who are 'just experimenting'. The results are the invisibility of bisexuality as a valid sexual identity, its marginalisation and stigmatisation of bisexuals (Ellis, 2012).

## **2.4 Bisexuality: Intimate relationships**

Understanding the problematic nature in the term bisexuality resulting from its ambiguous positioning and contingent role in wider discourses of sexuality, and the resulting effects on contemporary bisexuality discourse, pave the way to the key issues that constitute the bulk of the current literature on bisexuals' intimate relationships.

### *2.4.1 Intimate relationship problems*

Intimate relationships of bisexual individuals are not void of the common problems evident in any other heterosexual or homosexual relationship (Fox, 1996; Klesse, 2010, 2011). A few common examples of challenges in relationships, regardless of sexual identities, are social and economics hardships, and individual psychological problems impacting the relationship (Klesse, 2010). Abuse is another problem that research has shown to be evident across intimate relationships of all kinds (Island & Lettelier, 1992; Leventhal & Lundy, 1999). Research shows that role expectations in relation to division of labour is gendered and can cause problems in relationships (Jamieson, 1998). Similarly, bisexual relationships, as well as lesbian and gay, have been documented as being non-egalitarian (Carrington, 1999). On the other hand, comparative studies show no difference in relationship satisfaction between heterosexual and homosexual relationships (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau et. al., 1997; Weeks et. al., 1996). On the other hand, there have been very few studies reporting satisfying intimate relationships between bisexuals and their sexual and intimate partners (Atkins, 2002; George, 1993; Klesse, 2007; Rust, 1996; Weinberg et. al., 1994).

Other studies have focused on the role of stigma in same-sex relationships of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals resulting from their sexual minority identities as well as their romantic involvement with a partner of the same gender/sex (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rostosky et. al., 2007; Todosijevic et. al., 2005). Stigmatisation and discrimination have been studied as being minority stressors that impact individuals' abilities to engage and maintain intimacy in relationships (Meyer, 2003; Meyer et. al., 2008). In addition, a correlation has been consistently found between the impacts of stigmatization and decreased mental health in LGB individuals (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Kuyper & Fokkema, 2011; Meyer, 2003).

#### *2.4.2 Bisexual specific relationship problems*

Despite these overlaps, there are particular issues pertaining to bisexuals' relationships only. Some of these specific struggles impacting bisexuals' relationships are the nuances of identification as a bisexual, views on bisexuals' monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, and effects of bi-negativity such as marginalisation and stigma (Fox, 1996; Klesse, 2011). Also the lack of support networks and the arising complexities in families, sexual practices and gender relations may all have further implications on bisexuals' intimate relationships (Klesse, 2010).

Considering the particular uniqueness of those individuals' relationships, found in the variety of different relationship styles that they could engage in and the diversity in their culture (Hutchins, 1996; Klesse, 2007; Rust, 1996), the current literature on this topic appears to still be minimal. Only recently have studies began to focus on bisexuals' intimate relationships as distinct from other same-sex

relationships of lesbians and gays (Klesse, 2011). The underlying assumption that same-sex relationships are exclusive to those who identify as lesbian and gay has resulted in excluding bisexuals as a separate group in research (Klesse, 2010).

#### *2.4.3 Gender dynamics in bisexuals' intimate relationships*

Some of the studies on bisexual relationships have investigated the role of gender on relationship dynamics (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005; Pennington, 2009; Weinberg, Williams & Pryor, 1994). One of the early studies to address gender, conducted in the USA during the 1980s, found that traditional gender dynamics play a role in bisexuals' relationships (Weinberg et al., 1994). More recent studies have shown similar findings (Bhugra & Silva, 1998; Pennington, 2009). Bisexuals' same-sex and opposite-sex relationships appeared to be predicated upon traditional gender stereotypes (Bhugra et al. 1998, Gustavson, 2009; Pennington 2009; Weinberg et al., 1994). Moreover, studies have found that due to the integration of conventional concepts of gender into relationships, bisexuals experience males and females differently in these relationships (Bhugra & Silva, 1998; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Bode, 1976; Pennington, 2009; Shokeid, 2002; Weinberg et al., 1994; Weinrich, 2000). The findings of two studies conducted in the USA (Pennington, 2009; Weinberg et al., 1994;) and one UK based (Bhugra & Silva, 1998), all comprised of male and female bisexual participants, showed that overall participants' traditional gendered self-identity remained consistent regardless of their partners' gender. This was due to the dominant gender stereotypes that were maintained in relationships. More particularly bisexuals' sexual preferences were based upon conventional gender stereotypes (Bhugra & Silva, 1998; Weinberg et. al., 1994).

Pennington's qualitative study (2009), based on semi structured one-to-one interviews examined how individuals negotiate their gender performances in their romantic relationships, and how these performances may change because of their partners' gender. The study included 14 females and six males, majority white, age range 18 to 62. The results demonstrated a significant difference between men's and women's flexibility in gender performances, whereby women showed more flexibility than men in both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Moreover, another qualitative study, using two focus groups of four females and three males, ages between 23 and 33, also portrayed a difference between bisexual women and men. Women gave more priority than men to emotional aspects of attraction to a partner, and saw those as essential for relationship development. Also, women's emotional preferences were for the same-sex, whereas men's preferences were for the opposite sex (Bhugra & Silva, 1998).

Moreover, in Pennington's study (2009) some bisexuals who questioned conventional gender roles were more likely to resist them and were aware of the inequality created by those roles, but often conformed due to societal expectations and pressures. This resonated with Weinberg's (1994) study, where males felt obliged to conform to masculine roles with females but experienced more freedom in gender role in their same-sex relationships. Klesse's (2005) study, devising a variety of qualitative methods, explored the stories of eleven bisexual women in the UK regarding their non-monogamous relationship styles and the effects that stereotypes of promiscuity, as a label of non-monogamous relationships, has on them. One of the several findings suggested that bisexual women are particularly under pressure to negotiate their sexuality when in non-monogamous relationships. In addition, Pennington's (2009) study recorded unexpected findings related to influential

characteristics, other than gender, that played a part in the relationships' power dynamics, such as age, physique and experience, which were not explored due to the study's aims and limitations.

Overall these studies have focused on gender in their attempts at understanding bisexuals' relationships. The findings suggest that bisexuals' gendered self-identity remains the same whether in same-sex or opposite-sex relationships. In addition, bisexuals have different experiences in opposite-sex relationships than in same-sex relationships because of the partner's gender. In general the studies indicate that bisexuals conform to gender roles. However, women are more flexible than men in taking on different gender roles of masculinity and femininity in different relationships.

#### *2.4.4 Effects of bisexuality stereotypes on relationships*

Bisexual people face several difficulties due to the bi-negativity experienced from both heterosexual and homosexual communities. Bisexual identities have been faced with pathologisation evoked by negative stereotypes and biphobia. Klesse (2011) argues that this bi-negativity and oppression of bisexuality has resulted in several of the problems that bisexuals experience in their intimate lives and relationships.

Several studies have shed light on the effects that different types of bisexual stereotypes and biphobia have on bisexual's intimate relationships (Bhugra & Silva, 1998; Klesse, 2005; Gustavson, 2009; Hoang, Holloway & Mendoza, 2011). In Bhugra and Silva's (1998) study stereotypes about bisexuality were evident in participants' experiences and the influence these have on their preferences for sexual behaviour and attraction. A quantitative study in the USA examined 87 bisexual

women's identity congruence in relation to internalised biphobia and infidelity in their relationships with men and women. The results showed that bisexual women who had high-internalised biphobia had lower identity congruence. Moreover, bisexual women had much higher rates of infidelity when with male partners (62.5 %) than female partners (10.5 %) (Hoang et. al., 2011). Another study, done in Sweden and devising a qualitative method of in depth interviews with 16 bisexual women, between the ages of 19 and 35, explored the role of relationships in comprehending sexuality. One of the findings illustrated that the discourse of 'bisexual traitor', one of the several bisexual stereotypes, was evident in bisexual women's relationships with lesbians (Gustavson, 2009). Klesse's (2005) findings from her exploration of eleven bisexual women's narratives suggested that being labelled by any of the stereotypes common to bisexuals, such as promiscuity, may have negative impacts on a woman's reputation and in return on her ability to engage in intimate relationships without being at emotional risk.

In summary, these studies point out to bisexual specific stereotypes such as promiscuity and infidelity and the negative effects these have on bisexuals' relationships. Moreover, these stereotypes influence bisexuals' preferences and choice of being in same-sex or opposite-sex relationships. Bisexual women in particular are affected negatively by the promiscuity and traitor discourses attached to bisexuality and in return impact both styles of relationships.

#### *2.4.5 Monogamous and non-monogamous relationships*

Other studies have focused more on bisexuals' monogamous and non-monogamous relationships. Findings from these studies suggested that bisexual women in non-monogamous relationships were mainly unaffected by gender of the



partner, number of partners, as well as other variables (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005; Reinhardt, 2011). In two of the studies, the bisexual women in non-monogamous relationships were particularly aware of the bisexual promiscuity discourse but did not see it as too problematic (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005). In Gustavson's (2009) study, half of the 16 bisexual women interviewed, median age 21, who were in non-monogamous relationships, reported that their expectations in relationships from their partners were not too fixed regarding the partner(s)' gender, and did not see gender as an issue that affects their identities. Klesse's (2005) study, which explored the stories of eleven bisexual women, all in non-monogamous relationships, reported that the women resisted being controlled by culture's expectations and strived to live according to their own ways.

Furthermore, all bisexual women participants in Gustavson's (2009) study demonstrated an awareness of the definition of bisexuality as that of being with a man and woman simultaneously. Those in non-monogamous relationships expressed that this awareness has allowed them to use the definition as means of justification to explore a non-monogamous lifestyle, whereby this would have not been suited for a heterosexual life. On the other hand, the women who were in monogamous relationships refrained from using the term 'bisexual' as an identity because of the negative stereotypes associated with it. These findings clearly echo how the term itself is problematic as an identity, in particular for women in monogamous relationships.

Klesse's (2005) study, concerned mainly with the dominant discourse of promiscuity that connects non-monogamy and bisexuality, showed that the discourse of promiscuity intersects with several other discourses relating to ethnicity, class, gender and sexual differences, therefore resulting in certain individuals being more

prone to such allegations. Dominant discourses like that of promiscuity may affect individuals' social lives in different ways, for instance some decide not to 'come out' as bisexuals in certain social situations and environments. One study on non-monogamous lifestyles, a descriptive case study in the USA, comprised of 26 couples of female bisexuals and their male partners, in non-traditional/non-monogamous relationships, showed that the examined variables of education, time of disclosure of bisexuality, communication, income and frequency of sex, normally contributing to satisfactory relationships in homosexual males' relationships, did not play a significant role in the satisfactory relationships of bisexual women with their male partners. The researcher suggests that the results could be due to the open mindedness of the participants' and their partners evident in their non-traditional lifestyles (Reinhardt, 2011). This study further shows the complexity of bisexuals' relationships as well as the need to understand this population separately and not based on other heterosexual or homosexual relationships.

The discussed studies' findings illustrate that bisexual women's identities in non-monogamous relationships are generally not affected by their partners' genders or number of partners. In addition, their non-monogamous relationships are not affected by bisexual specific stereotypes such as promiscuity. On the other hand, bisexual women in monogamous relationships appear to be negatively affected by stereotypes of bisexuality. The difference between the women who are in non-monogamous relationships and those who are not sheds light on the non-homogeneous characteristics not only of bisexuals but among bisexual women as well.

## 2.5 Overview and critique of the literature

### 2.5.1 *Literature on bisexuals' relationships*

The examined literature on bisexuals' relationships could fall under three main categories denoted by the subheadings above: gender dynamics in bisexual relationships, effects of bisexual specific stereotypes, and monogamous/non-monogamous relationship styles. Despite the broad differences and each study's specific aims, all of the studies above reflect issues pertinent to factors affecting bisexuals' intimate relationships. The varying degrees of shadiness in the intersection of all these aspects in the studies under consideration, as the review has shown and as mentioned at the beginning, mirror the complexities inherent in bisexuals' relationships. These studies also demonstrate the link between the problematic and ambiguous term of bisexuality and relationship issues arising from it. In addition, the effects pertaining to the social construction of binary classifications of gender and sexuality, which have left bisexuality as falling somewhere in between, are also illustrated as contributing factors to bisexuals' experiences in relationships.

Examining the literature on a broad scale shows that the majority of the studies were conducted in the USA, and fewer in the UK. This shows the need to conduct more UK-based studies. Moreover, the limited amount of research on this topic calls for a need for more research that can produce rich data to provide a deeper understanding of bisexuals' intimate relationships. Despite the mention of which methods were employed in these studies, few state the methodology used. This points out to a possible lack of rigour in the available research and inevitably the necessity of empirical research with methodological thoroughness.

The discussed studies on bisexuals' relationships have grouped women and men together, except in studies on non-monogamy. These studies have pointed out to

differences in how women and men experience their relationships and the factors affecting them. Other research shows that bisexual women's experiences are distinct from bisexual men in relation to the types of discrimination they face such as, the eroticisation of women's same-sex sexual activities by heterosexual men (Friedman & Leaper, 2010; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009). This shows the need to study each group separately in order to gain a deeper understanding of them. Yet, among bisexual women themselves, there are evident differences in experiences based on the type of relationship they are involved in. For instance, the studies show that although in general bisexual women are affected negatively by bisexual particular stereotypes, bisexual women in monogamous relationships are particularly affected, whereas those in non-monogamous relationships seemed to be less affected. These differences in bisexual women's experiences further point out to the insufficiency of the current literature in understanding bisexual women's experiences of different relationship styles.

### 2.5.2 *Identifying a gap*

The literature on bisexuality theorising can broadly be grouped as focusing either on bisexuality as a concept to understand sexuality in general, or as an identity within the spheres of gender and sexuality studies. Relationships of bisexuals on the other hand, appear to be but a drop in that ocean of theorising. My reading of the literature demonstrated a primary emphasis and interest of understanding bisexual individuals based on their gender and sexuality identities, and the interlinked-ness of these aspects, as well as in relation to the choice of partner. Considering the close relationship between bisexuality and partner choice, I found it quite surprising that the literature is so minimal on bisexuals' relationships. More specifically there appears to

be a lack of research on how these aspects are experienced and related to in bisexuals' relationships whereby an intersection and an overlap of all these issues could potentially exist, and either clarify and/or further provide insight into understanding bisexuals' relationships. Hence, the aim of this research study is to understand how women make sense and construct their relationships within all these existing paradigms.

On the other hand, the literature on bisexuals' relationships appears to focus more on negative impacts on their relationships caused by the nuances of bisexual identification. Arguably, this provides a limited perspective of these relationships and a lack of understanding into other possible ways in which bisexuals' relationships may contribute to their lives positively for instance. Hence, I realised that a gap exists in focusing on the relationship as the primary aspect rather than sexual and/or gender identities as the priority in the relationship. I therefore wondered, how do women construct meanings of their bisexual experiences in their relationships, and what is the role of these relationships in women's lives?

## **2.6 Bisexuality in the psychological therapies**

While many of the theoretical literature, debates and arguments hold their positions within their respective disciplinary fields, as a counselling psychologist researching bisexuals' women's relationships, I continuously reflected on the effectiveness, practicality and usage of these theories in relation to the individual person.

At the dawn of psychoanalysis bisexuality theory was considered crucial for understanding other concepts such as psychopathology (Khan, 1974; Kubie, 1974), psychosexual development (Stekel, 1920/1950), homosexuality (Alexander, 1933;

Limentani, 1976), and masculinity and femininity (Stoller, 1972). Hence, in the 1970's therapists and other medical and psychiatric professionals disregarded bisexuality as a possible sexual orientation, while others, such as Ruitenbeek (1973) believed that those who claimed bisexuality as a sexual identity are in denial about their homosexuality and should be helped with choosing either a heterosexual or a homosexual orientation (Storr; 1999). With the removal of homosexuality as a diagnostic category in the DSM II in 1974, psychiatry and psychology began considering more affirmative therapies for gays and lesbians, yet, the dichotomous view of sexual orientation continued to dominate (Fox, 1996). This further constrained the development of theoretical and research literature specific to bisexuals.

Although current psychological therapies have moved far from these views, a lack of awareness on bisexuality still exists (Ellis, 2012). One of the arguments on the invisibility of bisexuals in the discipline of psychology falls on therapists' continuous tendency to view sexuality in dichotomous terms (Barker & Langdridge, 2008). The implications that this lack of awareness has on the provision of psychological therapies for bisexuals and their partners has been deemed grave (Neal & Davis, 2006). Moreover, the invisibility bisexuals experience due to underlying assumptions about their heterosexuality when in relationships with someone of the opposite sex/gender further reinforces their invisibility in the therapies arena (Klesse, 2007). The societal devaluation of lesbian, gay and bisexuals' intimacies could also affect the ways in which these individuals make meanings of their intimacies (Frost, 2013). Hence, an awareness of these issues as well as the nuanced understanding of bisexual discourses and the implications of that is necessary for therapists working with bisexual clients. Klesse (2007) argues that in order to provide professional and

supportive therapy to bisexual clients, an awareness of the diverse biphobic discourses and manifestations is rudimentary. In addition, existing material for psychological therapists and in the form of self-help addresses problems of same-sex couples, hence excluding bisexual specific relationships and other relationships than are not based on monogamy (ibid).

While these arguments exist, it appears that there is still a lack in addressing bisexuals' relationships specifically in the psychological therapies, which can be further supported and confirmed by the literature search on bisexual relationships. Even when consulting relationship specific journals, such as the journal of sexual and relationship therapy, only 14 results appear under the search terms "bisexual or bisexuals or bisexuality" since 2000 until December 2014. Six of these articles have grouped LGBT together, four have grouped bisexual and homosexual men together, and the remaining three refer to same-sex relationships in which lesbians and bisexuals are grouped together. In consulting the wider literature in sexuality and gender studies, such as the journal of 'Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity' under the search terms "bisexuality or bisexual or bisexuals" and "relationships or love or relationship" again the total of 14 results emerges. This snapshot of literature augments arguments posed by bisexuality researchers on how the erasure of bisexuality as a distinct category in research could further contribute to binegativity and discriminatory views (Barker et. al., 2008). In addition, the literature review, in leaning more towards understandings of bisexuality and bisexuals' relationships from fields other than counselling psychology and other psychological therapies, is but a mere reflection of what appears to be the bulk of the literature available.

## 2.7 Research question, aims and objectives

I have argued that despite the evidenced impact of bisexual identification and its implications on bisexuals' relationships, there is a lack of research on how bisexuals' relationships as a unique type encompassing several styles of relationships, are organised, constructed and contextualised individually amongst women within the context of these relationships. Also, how bisexual women make sense and meaning of themselves in light of their relationships is still unclear in the literature. Although some of the existing research shows that bisexuals have an awareness of the major political debates and/or issues surrounding bisexuality, my question remained, to what degree is that influencing the meanings they assign to their relationship experiences?

Based on the identified gap, and in accordance with qualitative research principles and particularly grounded theory methodology, the following research question was formulated: how do women construct meaning of their bisexual experiences in the context of different types of relationships? Devising a broad research question provides a method of enquiry into the phenomena to be studied in a general way (Flick, 2011). The purpose in grounded theory is to allow the phenomena to be explored flexibly without the imposition of constraints prior to the commencement of data gathering (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Therefore, in this research I focus on the relationship being the context of these women's production of meanings, not to disregard the societal and other wider contexts, on the contrary, but as means of purposefully moving the focus away from the sexual and gender politics that already seem to prevail in bisexuality literature. Arguably, and truly so, the relationship itself, and whether it is with another woman or man or any other form, already creates a political context. Yet, my argument is the usefulness of these theories in the analysis of meanings shared within two or more



individuals as human entities rather than merely sexual, gendered and/or political entities. After all, despite the sexual and the gender becoming political, this remains but one perspective of looking into the individual, and arguably perhaps not the most suited for counselling psychologists, which may account for the lack of literature in the discipline.

## **2.8 Use of terms in the thesis**

Hemmings (2002) argues that due to the many definitions of bisexuality and the contradictory meanings that the term bisexual carries, this has resulted in a minimal amount of theorising on bisexuality considering the problems of disentangling these meanings. Having presented the multiple meanings around bisexuality and their relative histories, and in order to avoid this trap, I chose to use bisexuality under the most common recent definition as “a desire that does not limit itself to the eroticization of one gender; or (...) as a desire that does not discriminate in terms of either gender or the morphology of the sexed body” (Klesse, 2011, p.230). The major reason for choosing this definition is due to its inclusive nature and distance from framing bisexuality as necessarily only a sexual identity, or as contingent upon the partner's gender. In this study, when speaking of bisexual, bisexuality, bisexual women and bisexual experiences, these do not refer to an assumed sexual identity, rather, and as the analysis will show, they have been used as the participants themselves communicated their understandings of them.

Choosing ‘bisexual experiences’ as a term in the research question was to allow this term to be an umbrella for the several possible ways of relating and/or identifying to bisexuality as a sexual identity and/or a sexual orientation and/or a sexual behaviour and/or a gendered position. Hence, the aim was to allow the participants to

bring out their meanings of what bisexual is for them. This further implies that 'bisexual identity' will be used only to refer to individuals who have chosen it.

Considering the multiplicity of definitions and perspectives construed based on differing epistemologies around not only bisexuality, but what male and female is, what woman and man is, what masculinity and femininity is, again I have chosen the same route of allowing participants to define their own terms within these multiple narratives. In the analysis chapter, this becomes more apparent and will be discussed in more depth.

Finally, as the emphasis of the study is on relationships, one of the sampling criteria, discussed in chapter four, purposefully recruited women who have been in at least one sexual and intimate relationship with a man and one with a woman and/or other genders. In addition, all the participant information forms and flyers stated the research subject further allowing the participants to choose whether they felt this topic resonated with their relationship experiences or not. Overall, the rationale behind this method of using terms was to permit the research sample to account for the multiplicity of terms inherent to bisexuality, hence, forming a significant aspect of the study in itself.

## **Chapter III: Research Design**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Various methodologies and methods are available as means of investigating knowledge (Flick, 2011). The choice of research design for this study stemmed initially from my ways of viewing the world and what is reality, compounded with a careful assessment of the best means for exploring the subject at hand and answering the research question.

The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Framework for higher education in England and Wales (2008) refers to a professional doctorate's hallmark as research that develops novel knowledge for its relevant professional discipline. Since this research fulfils the requirements of a professional doctorate in counselling psychology, its design constantly aimed at producing knowledge of value to practitioners. In order to achieve this, four elements were considered in designing the research: the epistemology, the theoretical perspective, the methodology and the methods (Crotty, 1998). The intertwining of these four elements forms the backbone of this chapter. It provides the rationale for using a social constructivist grounded theory methodology, and how the process was developed leading to choice of methods employed for gathering and analysing data.

### **3.2 Quantitative and qualitative paradigms**

The first decision made once the topic of investigation was identified, was the research paradigm to be employed. Howell (2013) argues that the researcher approaches their project with pre-conceptions about the reality and the world, and this inevitably affects the methodological approach, methods of data collection and the

research project. He further highlights the significance of the researcher's philosophy going hand in hand with the chosen methodology. On the other hand, Kasket (2012) contends that counselling psychologists should approach research with a pluralistic attitude by recognising the multitude of routes available for exploring a research topic. She also argues the effectiveness of differing methodologies in exploring a topic, which could take precedence over the researcher's epistemological stance, and places primacy upon matching the methodology to the research question. Hence, to make this decision, four main interrelated aspects were accounted for: my ontological and epistemological positioning, the research question, the existing literature on the topic, and counselling psychology's epistemological underpinnings.

### *3.2.1 Paradigms, counselling psychology and researcher*

The primary approaches to research are qualitative, quantitative and combination of the two (Flick, 2011). Choosing a qualitative rather than a quantitative or mixed methods approach was the first step in the design process. Despite psychology having greatly relied in the past on quantitative approaches as means of quantifying phenomena, isolating causes and effects to allow findings to be generalised and used as general laws (Flick, 2011), it has more recently been criticised as lacking in regards to the study of subjective experiences and meanings, thus deeming insufficient in providing insight into everyday problems (Bruner 1991; Sarbin 1986).

Moreover, quantitative research is positioned epistemologically within objectivist/positivist perspectives. The positivist perspective perceives knowledge as objective, measurable and identifiable based on the underpinning philosophy that there is a reality that can be objectively studied and understood (Denzin & Lincoln,

2000). While positivism reflects a reductionist attitude as it assumes a single truth (Crotty, 1998), this view opposes the very essence of counselling psychology as a discipline located within the postmodern movement and linked to it epistemologically, which is critical of positivism (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). In addition, counselling psychology has problematized reductionist thinking as leading to categorisation and scapegoating which disregard the complexity and fluidity of individuals' experiences (Langdridge, 2007; Strawbridge, 1994; Szasz, 1997).

Training as a counselling psychologist for the past three years, I have become aware of the significance of implementing multiple theoretical perspectives as means of gaining insight into a human being, while maintaining that no single theory can entirely elucidate the complexity of an individual. Although counselling psychology privileges the individual subjective experience by valuing understanding over claims of universal truth, it also draws influences from the scientist-practitioner model of psychology by aiming to produce scientifically evidenced research which can be validated within the traditional realm of scientific psychology (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). Thus, using a quantitative paradigm would provide one way of investigating a research topic and consequently offering scientifically evidenced research, yet this remains one of various perspectives of understanding.

### *3.2.2 Paradigms and research topic*

Quantitative studies focus on measuring and analysing relationships between variables within a 'value-free' context, rather than seeking to understand the social processes underlying these relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Based on the research aims at understanding the complexities of bisexuals' relationships, and the meanings created by women in this context, it appeared that approaching sexuality

and non-normative relationship styles from a positivist/objectivist framework could fail to capture the experiences especially as they are less easily dichotomised.

On the other hand, qualitative research is more relevant for studying social relationships and taking into account a multitude of viewpoints as well as the social and subjective meanings related to them (Flick, 2011). While keeping in mind the complexity of sexuality terms and labels, and how they have been built upon categorisation, and considering the research's purposes to explore the possible impacts of these terms on relationships, it appeared contraindicative to follow through with an objectivist quantitative approach that aims at quantifying and further categorising. In addition, bisexuality researchers argue that there is a tendency when using quantitative methods in research on bisexuals to generalise the findings, resulting in the assumption that all bisexuals are the same, which further blurs differences in individuals within this group (Barker et. al., 2012).

### **3.3 Ontological and Epistemological positions**

The process of choosing a qualitative research paradigm highlighted my personal ontological and consequently epistemological position as a researcher. Ontology is broadly defined as the study of the nature of existence and being, hence it provides a way of understanding closely linked to the study of knowledge, that is epistemology (Crotty, 1998). Reflecting upon my ontological positioning, I found that my beliefs lie within a relativist and realist ontology. A relativist perspective states that an individual's perception of reality is ultimately connected to their own experiences (Burr, 2003). Whereas the realist stance assumes that there is no objective truth or knowledge of the world, but rather many possible and valid truths to account

for any phenomenon based on varying perspectives, hence making knowledge constantly incomplete, limited and partial (Maxwell, 2012).

This led to considering the main epistemological positions underlying qualitative research: objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism (Crotty, 1998). Whereas the objectivist view poses that there is an objective truth that can be discovered if investigated in the right way, constructionism believes that truth and meaning are constructed through the object's engagement with the world. On the other hand, in subjectivism meaning arises out of the subject's imposition on the object, whereby the object makes no contribution to the emergence of meaning (Crotty, 1998).

### *3.3.1 Considering Subjectivism*

As I had already ruled out an objectivist approach, and due to my interest in the subjective experiences of the individual and the value that counselling psychology places upon this, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seemed relevant at first. This is due to the emphasis IPA places upon valuing the participant's subjective experiences, rooted in a subjectivist epistemological position. Through studying the meanings that particular experiences hold for participants, IPA aims at exploring how participants make sense of their personal worlds (Flick, 2011). This is achieved through the researcher's analysis which tries to make sense of the participant trying make sense of their world (Flick, 2009). Thus, IPA aims at producing an objective account of the subjective experiences whereby the researcher's perceptions and views are bracketed (Crotty, 1998).

Although IPA would have been one possible way of looking at how women experience their relationships, this however, would have placed more emphasis on

their lived experience of two phenomena under consideration, bisexuality and relationships. Hence, assuming that bisexuality and relationships as objects have an actual occurrence or are experiences in their own right prior to the individual's thinking about them, and that the individual then interprets and attributes meaning to them (Crotty, 1998, p.79). However, the research's interest is focused on how these meanings of bisexuality and relationships have been created, what are the processes involved, and how they further interact with and form part of the women's cultural meanings. Therefore, an IPA approach would not have achieved the study's aims.

### *3.3.2 Considering Constructionism*

Constructionism poses that every individual is born into a world where meanings are created out of a mixture of cultures and sub-cultures that are passed on, taught and learnt through an indirect and composite process of socialisation, which in return influences behaviour and thinking (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism is the view that meaning of reality is socially constructed. This incorporates all knowledge being contingent upon the constructions between humans and their world, which become meaningful through their development and transition within a social context (Crotty, 1998).

The belief that there is a world that exists regardless of the human being, yet it only becomes meaningful when meaning is constructed based on the individual's interpretation of the world, brings objectivity and subjectivity closer together. Social constructionism, emphasises that meanings arise out of humans' interpretations of the world they are born into and based on the existing social and conventional forms embedded within those institutions. Therefore, all meaningful social reality is socially constructed through the shared interactions and interpretations that humans make in



their social lives (Crotty, 1998). This further positions constructionism as both realist and relativist ontologically (ibid).

### *3.3.3 Constructionism and the research topic*

Referring back to the literature review, and how bisexuality and relationships are deeply embedded into our culture and the importance of their historical contexts, I found that going back to the experience itself without looking at the occurring multifaceted interactions would not achieve the aims of this study. The research aims at exploring how the women construct personal meanings, while also looking at the interplay between those and meanings already embedded in a society that attributes current connotations to sexualities, genders and relationships.

As previously discussed in chapters one and two, the term bisexuality as a constructed concept has not only emerged from within a particular context, but remains underpinned by many of the prevalent bisexual discourses attached to it. Moreover, as the literature shows, several underlying problems in the term bisexuality have had implications on the attitudes towards bisexuals and subsequently on their relationships. This in return supports the constructionist's view of how individuals understand themselves and others in light of their historical and social contexts (Broido, 2000). Thus, it appeared only reasonable to investigate this topic from a constructionist's standpoint as Crotty (1998) argues: "because of the essential relationship that human experience bears to its object, no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object (p.45)."

### 3.3.4 *Constructionism and counselling psychology*

It further appeared that a constructionist approach would not only be more suited to investigate this topic, but would bear more benefits to the field of counselling psychology. Although counselling psychologists aspire to understand the human's individuality and their subjective and inter-subjective experiences, this individual presents as a social being who is impacted and part of a larger frame of meanings. One of the research's aims is to clarify the significance of how this social being negotiates between self and these meanings in the context of their intimate and sexual relationships. This sits easily alongside counselling psychology's practice-led model rooted in its reflective-practitioner ethos, which is linked to a postmodern epistemology (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). The postmodernist view assumes that understanding is constructed in cultures, and therefore knowledge consists of fragments of understanding and there is no basis for establishing a solid truth (Flick, 2011).

Counselling psychology emphasises the relational dimension, which stresses the notion of inter-subjectivity and a co-construction between the unconscious minds of both therapist and client (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). Arguably then, both social constructionism and counselling psychology bring subjectivity and objectivity closer together. This further goes in hand with the realist view adopted in the paper. Therefore, adopting a social constructionist epistemological stance toward studying bisexuals' relationships could allow a way of developing and applying knowledge that is useful for professionals in the discipline.

### *3.3.5 Constructionism and researcher*

While taking into account the relevance of a constructionist epistemological stance in relation to the research topic and aims, and my ontological positioning, it further dawned on me that these beliefs themselves had been constructed. As constructionism is both realist and relativist, I realised that my realist and relativist stances are the product of a culmination of constructions based on my cultural and ethnic background, and education, constantly intertwining and changing with personal life experiences, and greatly influenced in the past years by training as a counselling psychologist.

## **3.4 Theoretical perspective**

As ontology sits alongside epistemology and informs the theoretical perspective, which personifies a particular approach to the way of understanding the world and how to study knowledge (Crotty, 1998), once a realist and relativist ontological positions were considered beside a social constructionist epistemology, this informed the theoretical perspective. Since constructionism as an epistemology is embodied in several theoretical perspectives, the choice of theoretical perspective was further based on its relevance to the research subject and goals.

### *3.4.1 Symbolic interactionism and social constructionism*

On reviewing the literature on theoretical perspectives, symbolic interactionism appeared to be a well-suited theoretical lens for exploring the research focus. Symbolic interactionism's starting point is based on the subjective meaning that individuals attach to their life experiences which arises out of their relationships with others and develops their identities (Goulding, 1999; Flick 2011). In conducting

research based on the symbolic interactionism perspective, the starting point is the subjective viewpoint of the individual that requires methodologically a reconstruction of this viewpoint in various ways through analysis (Flick, 2011). The researcher then intends to construct what the participants view as reality by taking into account how their experiences contribute to their reality construction (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992). This illustrates how symbolic interactionism goes hand in hand with the chosen social constructionist epistemological stance.

#### *3.4.2 Symbolic interactionism and research topic*

The research aspires to understand how women behave and create meanings out of their experiences of relationships, while attempting to investigate this through the belief lens that these meanings are constructed, real, and relative to each individual. Symbolic interactionism assumes that individuals develop meanings based on shared interactions and accordingly act and behave. These meanings arise out of shared social interactions with others and are contingent upon the emerging and interpretative processes used in ascribing meaning to other objects as well as self (Blumer 1969; Flick, 2011).

Taking into account these basic principles alongside the research topic and aims, the symbolic interactionism perspective leads the researcher to look at the participant's self and meaning as processes. This standpoint is appropriate for investigating how women in a relationship with another person of the same or different gender, presume that the relationship already carries a meaning. Yet, the meaning arises out of the interaction between the individual and their partner as well as the prevailing meanings and assumptions about relationships. Furthermore, these meanings may be different and modified according to the other individual or the type

of relationship. The symbolic interactionism perspective also allows examining how women respond to the actions and behaviours of their partners after construing meaning out of these others' actions and intentions.

In view of the significance of terms such as sexuality and gender, which shed light upon the essential role that language and prevalent discourses play in interactions, this further urged the choice of a theoretical framework that could account for how meanings arise from the intersectional, multifaceted and complex web of communications. Hence, symbolic interactionism with its focus on the processes of interaction that are symbolically characterised in forms of communication such as language and gestures (Goulding, 1999), seemed to be a suited theoretical framework to implement for this research topic.

### **3.5 Methodology: Grounded Theory**

#### *3.5.1 Constructionism, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory*

The relation between constructionism and symbolic interactionism led the way to considering a grounded theory methodology, and assessing its relevance to the research topic and discipline of counselling psychology. The methodology was informed by symbolic interactionism as means of grounding its principles and logic (Crotty, 1998). Methodologically, symbolic interactionism entails that the individuals' views of society, actions and objects are carefully studied. The researcher has to view the worlds and lives of the participants as the participants view them, and meanings attached to actions and objects need to be understood as the participant understands them. Henceforth, by taking the viewpoint of those studied, the researcher aims for a deep understanding of those individuals' realities (Crotty,

1998). The choice of grounded theory methodology was closely linked to the principles of symbolic interactionism in order to achieve the research's aims.

The methodological development of grounded theory in the original work of Strauss and Glaser was influenced greatly by Blumer's (1969) work on symbolic interactionism (Flick, 2011). Building upon the essential principles of symbolic interactionism as a foundation, Strauss and Glaser developed methods and procedures for collecting and analysing qualitative data to come up with a theory grounded in the data that reflects the realities of individuals studied through their actions, words and behaviours (Goulding, 1999). Both symbolic interactionism and grounded theory emphasise attending to the process in the actions and actors and the meaning created, while assuming that individuals act on two levels, individually and collectively (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

### *3.5.2 Grounded theory origins*

Grounded theory originated from the collaborative work of two sociologists, Anslem Strauss, a qualitative researcher, and Barney Glaser a quantitative researcher, and was first described in their book "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" in 1967 (Goulding, 1999). Strauss and Glaser developed their approach in reaction to the prevalent quantitative and positivist research paradigms of the time, and as means of challenging the dominant view that qualitative research is lacking in thoroughness compared to quantitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The epistemological assumptions were a result of marrying two traditions in sociology: the Chicago school of pragmatism and Columbia University positivism (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This led to the systematic approach of grounded theory reflected in the rigorous methods of coding qualitative data by means of specifying explicit strategies underpinned by

Glaser's positivist and quantitative research training at Columbia University (ibid). On the other hand, Strauss's influence permeates through his Chicago School tradition of pragmatism, informed by symbolic interactionism, that assumed individuals' create structure through engaging in processes, hence making processes rather than structure central to understanding humans. According to Strauss, the social and subjective meanings emerge in the use of language and through action (Charmaz, 2006).

Glaser and Strauss's shared interest in studying social and social psychological processes led them to eventually develop a set of methods and procedures to analyse data that aims at discovering theory from the data as compared to testing hypotheses that may deem either true or false. They believed that the quantitative method hinders a creative approach to discovering knowledge. The grounded theory then explains the process under investigation in new theoretical terms while elucidating the conditions under which this process emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### *3.5.3 Schools of grounded theory*

As methodology forms an indispensable aspect of the research study, it was essential for me as a researcher to position myself within a school of grounded theory. This required a review of the literature on grounded theory that allowed an understanding of the similarities and differences amongst them. The debates between these different schools are many and on-going, and beyond this paper's scope. Therefore, a brief description of the epistemological differences shall suffice in order to justify the rationale behind the decision for choosing the constructivist grounded theory version.

Since the original development of grounded theory, divergences leading to different versions with different starting points of epistemological underpinnings have surfaced (Flick, 2011). As grounded theorists take various philosophical positions this influences how grounded theory methods are implemented (Birks & Mills, 2011). A recent review of grounded theory methodologies identifies four different models: Glaser and Strauss's 1965 original work, Strauss and Corbin's 1990, feminist's 1995, and Charmaz's 2000 constructivist grounded theory (Fernandez, 2012).

Whereas other grounded theory authors distinguish between different grounded theory models based on what they call the first generation of grounded theorists, which includes Glaser and Strauss's original work, and the second generation including Strauss and Corbin, Charmaz, Clarke and others (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005), position grounded theory as methodologically being influenced by the second, third, fourth and fifth of the eight moments they identify in qualitative research history. Consequently, they position Glaser and Strauss's 1967 work in the second moment marked by post-positivism as the researchers' ontological and epistemological underpinnings assume that the researcher can be an objective observer of a reality that can be discovered (Birks & Mills, 2011). Yet, Glaser and Strauss's seminal work did not explain a methodological underpinning to grounded theory, which has caused one of the major criticisms by the second GT generation (Birks & Mills, 2011). For instance, Charmaz (2000) and Bryant (2003) characterise Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory to be underpinned by an objectivist and positivist paradigm due to the assumptions held regarding the researcher's ability to collect data without previously reviewing the literature. According to Glaser and Strauss this allows the researcher to carry out inductive studies that are built on



objective observations leading to the discovery of data that could be replicated by another researcher using the same methods (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Later, Corbin and Strauss (2008) identified symbolic interactionism and pragmatism to be the philosophies that methodologically underpin their version of grounded theory. Whereas Glaser's work never focused on this aspect, and continued to emphasise what creates a grounded theory as a method. Due to his ideas of how theory emerges from the data, he is usually considered as a critical realist within a post-positivist model (Annells, 1996). Glaser (2005) believes that adopting any philosophical position takes away from the grounded theory's potential of emerging as it should.

Strauss's divergence from Glaser and his later works with Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) differed epistemologically as well. The main difference revolved around Glaser's point that the data is waiting to be discovered as an objective truth, whereas Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that every researcher's active engagement with the data, even their background and beliefs, might influence their focus on different factors, hence resulting in different findings.

Charmaz (2000, 2006) further developed grounded theory methodologically by arguing that knowledge, and consequently the emerging grounded theory, are constructed by both researcher and research participants. The researcher then aims at interpreting the data within the research context resulting in theoretical analyses that is another construction of a reality rather than an objective account of it (Charmaz, 2006). Hence, she advocates a constructivist grounded theory methodology that assumes multiple social realities positioned philosophically between realist and postmodernist visions (Byrant & Charmaz, 2011). The constructivist grounded theory maintains the rigour of the original grounded theory method, yet it encourages

reflexivity, openness and empathic understanding of the participants' worlds, behaviours and meanings (Charmaz, 2006).

Once the different philosophical and epistemological positions underlining the different grounded theory versions became clear, choosing the constructivist version was an obvious choice. Glaser and Strauss's 1967 GT version was ruled out due its objectivist positioning that did not fit with the research's topic, aims, and researcher's epistemological stance. Strauss and Corbin's version was first considered as it reflects a relativist and subjectivist positioning. However, the constructivist model appealed most due to its clear epistemological stance that went hand in hand with all the previous contemplations that led to considering a social constructionist perspective.

#### *3.5.4 Constructivist Grounded Theory*

Conducting qualitative research within the constructivist paradigm entails some key elements. The purpose of the research is to bring forth the meanings that individuals ascribe to particular phenomena by tapping into their subjective personal accounts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It further takes into account the researcher's experiences of the research area and their knowledge based on the assumption that the emerging data is a co-construction of meanings between researcher and participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Hence, the knowledge constructed constitutes one of the many different views of reality as constructivism assumes a relativist perspective of social realities and the mutual construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2000). Moreover, the researcher endeavours to represent the realities of the participants in all their complexity and multiplicity while maintaining that the accounts are solely

representations rather than replications of experiences (Byrant & Charmaz, 2007).

This view of GT makes it:

“interpretivist in acknowledging that to have a view at all means conceptualising it (...) A repositioned GTM bridges defined realities and interpretations of them. It produces limited, tentative generalisations, not universal statements. It brings the social scientist into analysis as an interpreter of the scene, not as the ultimate authority defining it.”

(Byrant & Charmaz, 2007, p.51-52)

### *3.5.5 Constructivist Grounded Theory and research topic*

Several features of the constructivist grounded theory make its methodology and accompanying methods appropriate for the research topic at hand. Grounded theory requires that the macroscopic contextual issues be taken into account when examining a particular phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). Instead of focusing only on the particular phenomenon under investigation, broader conditions that might influence this phenomenon are also consciously acknowledged. This type of research then attempts to explore and learn about the lived experiences and worlds of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Hence, this methodology is well suited for exploring bisexual women's experiences in the context of different types of relationships and in relation to the way bisexuality is construed. Through accounting for the apparent issues that influence bisexual women's relationships, as discussed in the literature review, while exploring the experiences of the women of their relationships, this methodology will provide a more holistic understanding of the

lived experiences of bisexual women. In addition, grounded theory can account for relationships as processes in an individual's life that are changing and growing, while also considering the different types of relationships acknowledged in this study.

### *3.5.6 Grounded theory and existing literature*

As stated previously, there is a limited amount of research reported on bisexual women's experiences of different relationship types. Corbin and Strauss (1998) emphasise the immense contribution that grounded theory particularly, and in comparison to other qualitative methods, provides to fields in which not much is known about. In addition, they argue, "grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p. 12). Therefore, through the use of grounded theory methods, the study aims to generate theory that will not only augment the current understanding of bisexual women's relationships, but will also allow for further investigation of this topic through the use of the generated theory as a starting point.

Referring back to some studies discussed in the literature review, both Klesse's (2005) and Pennigton's (2009) studies illustrated that several factors, such as ethnicity, class, age, physique and experience, can influence bisexuals' relationships. Therefore, in order to allow for more life experiences and the possibility for having been involved in more relationships, the chosen age of participants for this study, is 18 years and above. The use of grounded theory methods is significant in studying bisexual women's relationships as it allows for the inclusion of the wide variety of factors that may have influences on experiences of relationships.

### *3.5.7 Grounded Theory and research question*

Several of the examined studies (Weinberg et al., 1994; Pennington, 2009; Klesse, 2005; Gustavson, 2009) have prioritised gender over other matters in exploring bisexuals' relationships. Ellis (2012) argues that this prioritisation of gender in understanding bisexuals' relationships does not really provide any insight into how bisexuals experience the changing between homosexual and heterosexual relationships, nor does it shed any light on possible similarities and differences in each type of relationship. One of this research's aims is to explore the experiences of bisexual women in shifting from one type of relationship to another as well as how the context of the relationship might affect their experiences and shape their actions within each relationship type. Thus, the study will explore some of the issues described by Ellis that will contribute to the current and limited understanding of bisexual women's relationships and experiences.

Charmaz (2006) states, "a finished grounded theory explains the studies process in new theoretical terms, explicates the properties of the theoretical categories, and often demonstrates the causes and conditions under which the process emerges and varies, and delineates its consequences" (p. 7-8). Through generating theory by exploring bisexual women's different relationship types, the resulting knowledge may elucidate several different facets about these experiences. The generated theory from this study hoped to elucidate through the developed categories the possible similarities and differences in experiences of bisexual women.

### *3.5.8 Grounded theory and counselling psychology*

Several empirical studies on counsellor's attitudes toward LGB clients have shown how therapeutic interactions are often affected by the counsellor's biases and

stereotypes of LGB individuals (Bieschke et. al., 2000). Drawing on studies showing the implications of heterosexism and homonegativity, Morrow (2000) argues that societal beliefs and biases inevitably influence therapists' attitudes towards LGB people, and due to the lack of awareness of the unique issues that LGB individuals face, this may result in damaging therapeutic relationships. Moon (2010) argues that many professionals, including psychologists, still lack a thorough understanding of bisexuality and bisexuals' intimate relationships. These arguments reflect the limited knowledge that therapists have of bisexual issues, and sheds a light on the necessity of more research in this area. The study anticipates the production of novel knowledge that therapists can use to further their understanding of bisexual women's relationships, which will consequently equip them with better tools for working with this population, and perhaps challenge their existing attitudes, possible biases and improve communications with clients.

Moreover, therapists who are working with bisexual women should be aware that there might be several factors contributing to their relationship problems other than their mere sexuality. Based on the previously examined literature that demonstrates the complexities of bisexuality and bisexual relationships, one of this study's expected inputs is to provide a potential framework of bisexual women's relationships that can assist therapists in working with this client group without solely resorting to existing heterosexual or homosexual relationship frameworks. Therefore, grounded theory analyses can offer novel and complementary understandings of women's actions and beliefs in relationships to counselling psychologists and other psychotherapy professionals. The next chapter describes in depth the grounded theory methods implemented and directed towards achieving the research aims.

## Chapter IV: Methods

### 4.1 Introduction

Grounded theory, a qualitative type of analysis, provides a framework for a way of thinking and viewing phenomena in the world, and techniques for data collection to study the social phenomenon under consideration and generate theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory differs in its structure and purpose compared to other types of qualitative methods in linking developing concepts while focusing on the processes of change in stages (Morse, 2007). Grounded theory methods give a direction for collecting, managing and analysing data in order to generate theories grounded in the data gathered (Charmaz, 2006). As discussed in the previous chapter, there are different versions of grounded theory that differ in their epistemological underpinnings, which subsequently influence the methods employed. Having chosen the constructivist grounded theory version, I have followed Charmaz's methods for collecting and analysing data, yet these methods were used as flexible guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions (ibid).

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) emphasise certain aspects that are essential for using grounded theory methodology. First, the process of data gathering, analysis and theory construction occur simultaneously. This entails that coding and memo writing begin with the first interview. Second, theoretical sampling is a primary tool in searching for variations and patterns amongst data, while theoretical saturation necessitates as a result of no longer finding new properties, which ends the data collection process. Finally, the theoretical sorting and integration of memos assists in identifying the basic social process accounting for the majority of perceived behaviours (ibid). Maintaining the importance of these facets, this chapter describes

the methods used in line with grounded theory methodology. It includes the process of data gathering and generation, which encompasses participant recruitment, ethical considerations, the data collection methods, and finally the data analysis methods. In addition, the rationale behind using these particular methods in relation to the research area, research question, methodology, and the discipline of counselling psychology runs throughout the chapter.

## **4.2 Ethical considerations**

Prior to endeavouring on the data collection process, some essential ethical issues were addressed. Considering that sexuality and relationships are often a personal and could be a sensitive topic of discussion for many people, and more particularly with individuals who could be facing binegativity, the possibility that this study's interview questions may bring up painful emotions for participants was accounted for. In order to address ethical issues a few steps were put in place. First, and prior to participant recruitment and data collection, the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the research project.

### *4.2.1 Protecting participants and data*

In order to ensure participants' anonymity pseudonyms were given. As for other personal identifying information such as age and place of residence, these were grouped into categories. Raw and processed data in the form of digital or soft copies, for example audio recordings of the interviews, were saved on a password protected external drive. Other raw and processed data in hard copy forms, for instance, memos and analysis diagrams, were filed into a locked cabinet. Consent forms<sup>3</sup> that include

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<sup>3</sup> A blank copy of the consent form is provided in the appendices



participants' personal details were stored separately from any other data under a coding system only identifiable to the researcher. The coding system included identification numbers designated for the consent forms which were also stored under a password protected file separate from the raw and processed data and from the consent forms.

As a trainee Counselling Psychologist on the PsychD programme accredited by the British Psychological Society, the BPS provides a 'Code of Human Research Ethics', which also informed my research process. The code provides a set of principles for psychological research practice and underpins the values of the profession. These principles are: "respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons. Scientific value. Social responsibility. Maximising benefit and minimising harm" (British Psychological Society, 2014, pp. 8-11).

#### *4.2.2 Protecting researcher*

Being a student at the University of Roehampton, who was conducting interviews for the research by myself, off campus, and not under direct supervision of staff members, I followed the University's Lone Worker Policy. The majority of interviews were conducted at organisations where the participants were recruited. Therefore, staff members of the organisation were present during the time of the interviews, which decreased any risk. In addition, an arrangement was made to call a friend, Charles Kaye, before and after each off-site interview. Other ethical issues were considered throughout the participant recruitment and interviewing process, and will be discussed shortly.

### 4.3 Participant recruitment methods and sampling procedure

The study aimed initially at recruiting around 12<sup>4</sup> self-identified women, aged 18 years and above, and who have been in at least one intimate and sexual relationship with individuals of different genders. In order to ensure that the sampling methods used were efficient and effectual in gathering suitable data, three primary principles that all qualitative sampling is dependent on were taken into account:

“Principle 1. Excellent research skills are essential for obtaining good data.

Principle 2. It is necessary to locate ‘excellent’ participants to obtain excellent data

Principle 3. Sampling techniques must be targeted and efficient”

(Morse 2007, p.230-233).

As a trainee counselling psychologist I had acquired interviewing skills which were extremely helpful in communicating effectively and establishing rapport with participants. However, grounded theorists warn against assuming that such skills are sufficient for conducting interviews that can achieve the aims of grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2011). Therefore, in accordance with principle one and as means of further developing my research skills prior to commencing interviews, a pilot study was conducted with a colleague who met the study's requirements. The pilot study was carried out following all the steps of the research, and the interview enabled me to test and practice my interview techniques. On completion, and with the constructive feedback from my colleague, I reflected on areas that required development both in my interviewing techniques and the interview schedule.

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<sup>4</sup> The final sample size was based on theoretical saturation and will be discussed in the analysis section

#### 4.3.1 Convenience, initial and theoretical sampling

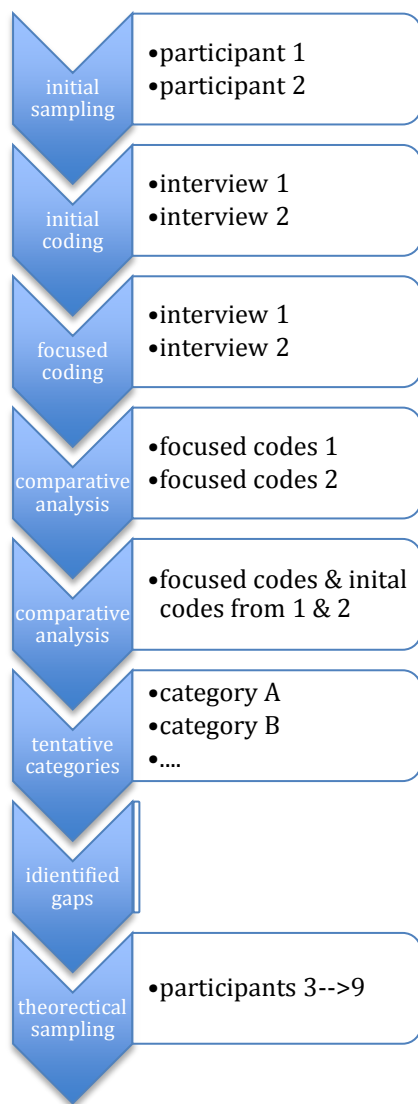
Grounded theory further entails more specific sampling principles and methods, which are: convenience sampling, purposeful sampling and theoretical sampling (Morse, 2007). Convenience sampling is used to locate individuals who have gone through the 'phenomenon' that requires exploration, leading to advertising the research in locations or organisations that provide services for this participant group (ibid).

Once convenience sampling was completed, initial sampling ensued as the starting point of data collection from participants who met the study's requirements (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2007). The organisations listed in table 4.1 were contacted around the same time, except for the BiCon Edinburgh<sup>5</sup>. The initial sampling included the first two participants and was based on receiving the responses first. After a comparative analysis was conducted between the tentative categories emerging from the first two interviews, theoretical sampling commenced with the third interview in order to begin developing those categories (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) argues that the purpose of theoretical sampling is to provide more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences by gathering data that will elucidate the categories resulting in the grounded theory generation. Hence, theoretical sampling continued as the research process progressed, providing the direction to follow that enhanced theoretical and conceptual development (ibid).

The analytical process and methods that were employed leading to theoretical sampling will be discussed shortly in the methods of analysis section. Figure 4.1 below illustrates the initial sampling process leading to theoretical sampling.

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<sup>5</sup> BiCon is an event organised yearly at different venues in the UK lasting between 3 to 4 days, and includes seminars and workshops on a diversity of topics such as bisexual identity, community & politics, & relationships. It also includes social events for people to meet and socialise. The BiCon I attended was taking place at University of Edinburgh, 18-21 July 2013.



*Figure 4.1: Initial sampling process*

#### *4.3.2 Recruitment methods*

Based on the principles of convenience sampling, the first step was identifying venues where it would be possible to promote the research. With the exception of University of Roehampton, all the other organisations were selected due to their lesbian, gay and/or bisexual specific services, with the aim of targeting ‘excellent participants’ as principle two indicates. Moreover, this insured that the convenience sampling technique was targeted, as principle three requires.

Flyers and posters<sup>6</sup> were prepared alongside an organisation letter<sup>7</sup> explaining the purpose of the study and emailed to the organisations. Upon receiving responses from interested individuals, an eligibility and demographics form<sup>8</sup> was handed out or emailed to potential participants. The questionnaire served multiple purposes: ensuring that participants met the research criteria, collecting basic demographics, and for ethical purposes ensuring that potential participants were not receiving any type of psychological therapy during the time of the interview or six months prior to it, in order to reduce risk of emotional distress and interference in the process of therapy. Table 4.1 below summarises the convenience sampling process, as well as initial and theoretical sampling based on the final research sample chosen, with a total of nine participants recruited.

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<sup>6</sup> Found in appendices

<sup>7</sup> Found in appendices

<sup>8</sup> Found in appendices

Organisations contacted	Method of contact	Method of research promotion	Responses received	Eligible participants	Non-eligible	Interviews conducted
East London Out Project	Email sent with organisation's letter	Promoted research in ELOP e-newsletter	Received 2 responses via email	2 eligible-contact stopped by respondents	0	0
PACE	Email sent with organisation's letter	Promoted through word of mouth at organisation	Received 1 response via email	Contact stopped by respondent	0	0
Pink Therapy	Email sent with organisation's letter	Promoted research in Pink Therapy's e-newsletter	Received 2 responses	One eligible	One not eligible (in counselling)	1
Bicommunity News	Email sent with organisation's letter	No reply	NA	NA	NA	NA
London Friend	Email sent with organisation's letter	No reply	NA	NA	NA	NA
Bicon Edinburgh	Face-to-face with organisers	Promoted through flyers and posters	Received 7 responses	7 eligible, 1 withdrew	0	6
University of Roehampton	Student at university	Posters	Received 1 response	1	0	1
Word of Mouth	Partner of participant	Word of mouth	Received 1 response	1 eligible	0	1
<b>Total responses received: 14</b>	<b>Total participants recruited: 9</b>					

Table 4.1: Sampling

Once a respondent was deemed suitable for this research study, a day, time and location were then agreed to conduct the interview. Interviews ranged between 30 minutes and up to one hour in time and were audio recorded. On meeting the

potential participant, a debriefing form<sup>9</sup> was handed out. The debriefing form states the purpose of the study and the aims, provides details on participants' right to withdraw at any time, and states that the material will be made anonymous.

Qualitative researchers who are part of the social group they are investigating have been termed 'insiders' (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). As I discussed in chapter one, my intimate and sexual relationships have been with men and women, hence situating me as an insider to the group of participants I interviewed. Moreover, a researcher's status as an insider has been argued to change at several points throughout a research investigation and varies based on the social group being studied (Allen, 2004).

Bisexuality researchers have emphasised the importance of qualitative researchers taking into account the context of interviewing as it could influence responses elicited (Barker et. al., 2012). Arguably, my position differed slightly between participants interviewed at BiCon (six out of nine) and those elsewhere (three out of nine). Considering that I was taking part of the events at BiCon, it appeared that all the participants recruited there already viewed me as an insider, which they communicated to me after the interviews. For instance, they expressed their ease and openness due to being interviewed by someone who was taking part of BiCon, which further reflects how boundaries and social proximities between researcher and participants are influenced creating dynamics particular to the situation (Ganga & Scott, 2006).

As for the participants who were not recruited at BiCon, the possibility that they might have viewed me initially as an outsider was accounted for based on the decision I made to disclose after interviews in order to minimise impacts of my personal experiences on the data collection. However, all participants had voluntarily

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<sup>9</sup> Found in appendices

consented to taking part of the research, with much enthusiasm and no obvious gain (ex. financial), reflecting their interest in the research and willingness to participate, therefore influencing the dynamics positively and towards the generation of rich data.

Participants were also asked after the interviews how they found it to take part and how they were feeling. To ensure that participants received support for any emotional distress that might have been caused by the research, a list of organisations was included in the debriefing form where they may be able to seek either group support or individual support in the form of counselling for instance. In addition, all participants were given consent forms; one copy remained with the participant and the other with the researcher. As a trainee counselling psychologist, my clinical experience further equipped me with the skills to be able to empathically handle situations when a participant showed signs of emotional distress during or after the interview, and also provided the necessary support throughout the interview process. This occurred with one participant only.

Table 4.2 summarises some basic demographics of the participants who took place in this study as well as other information relevant to the research.



Participant pseudonym	Age range	Self-Identified Ethnicity	Self-Identified Gender	Self-Identified Sexuality	Partners & Relationship types	Duration range of longest relationship	Place of interview & duration
P1: Emily	26-35	Greek	Female	Does not identify	Women Men  Monogamous	1-5 years 1-6 months	University of Roehampton  52 min
P2: Sara	18-25	Greek	Female	Does not identify	Women Men  Monogamous	6-12 months 6-12 months	University of Roehampton  62 min
P3: Laura	36-45	Scottish-White	Female	Bisexual	Women Men  Monogamous Polyamorous	1-5 years over 5 years	Bicon, meeting room  32 min
P4: Becky	46-55	Caucasian	Female	Bisexual/but prefers not using terms	Women Men  Monogamous Polyamorous	1-5 years over 5 years	Bicon, meeting room  51 min
P5: Christina	26-35	Irish-White	Female/queer	Bisexual	Women Men Transgender Queer  Monogamous Polyamorous	1-5 years Over 5 years	Bicon, meeting room  48 min
P6: Sophie	36-45	French-White	Female	Heteroflexible/ 70% heterosexual 30% Bisexual	Women Men  Monogamous Polyamorous	0-1 month Over 5 yrs	Bicon, meeting room  62min
P7: Jay	46-55	British	Male most of the time with feminine side	Bisexual	Women Men  Monogamous Polyamorous	Over 5 yrs Over 5 yrs	Bicon, meeting room  46 min
P8: Mary	26-35	British	Human/ Born female	Bisexual	Women Men  Monogamous Polyamorous	1-6 months over 5 yrs	Bicon, meeting room  40 min
P9: Sandra	55-65	British-White	Female	Fluid	Women Men  Monogamous	1-5 yrs over 5 yrs	Pink therapy, meeting room  63 min

Table 4.2: Demographics

#### **4.4 Data generation and collection methods**

Grounded theory includes qualitative methods for gathering data that “can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions, which are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.11). There are several available methods for gathering data for a grounded theory study, thus the choice for using intensive semi-structured interviewing was considered in relation to grounded theory methodology and the research question.

##### *4.4.1 Interviewing and grounded theory*

Intensive interviewing allows for an in-depth exploration of the topic at hand, and the participants' experiences in that domain to come to light. In grounded theory this is achieved through first devising few open-ended and general questions around the topic, and then more focused questions that will facilitate the emergence of more detailed stories (Charmaz, 2006). However, as the research process proceeds, in grounded theory interviewing, the range of interview topics narrows down as the researcher aims for more specific data relevant for developing the theory. Charmaz (2006) argues that intensive qualitative interviewing and grounded theory methods go hand in hand. “Both grounded theory methods and intensive interviewing are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (p. 28), and share a similar type of flexibility. In addition, interviewing has been evidenced to be valuable for grounded theory studies based on the extensive amount on studies conducted that have utilised it as the primary source for data generation (Birks & Mills, 2011).

#### *4.4.2 Interviewing and research question*

Interviews conducted for this research study were semi-structured allowing the researcher to follow the participant's conversation while acting as a coordinator (Birks & Mills, 2011). The purpose behind audio recording all interviews was to transcribe them for analysis. Extracts in the form of verbatim quotations from interview transcriptions, in addition to memos, provided rich data and formed the bulk of the analysis as will be illustrated in chapter five. Intensive interviewing serves several purposes in generating data, and is significant in terms of allowing the participant to explore their experiences and go beneath the surface (Charmaz, 2006). Some examples on how this is achieved is by asking participants to provide more details about their feelings, thoughts and behaviours, reiterating a point to either check accuracy or explore further, and knowing when to change the pacing or shift topics in order to remain within the interview purposes. In addition, showing respect, appreciation and validation of the participants is equally important (ibid).

Following from the arguments presented in chapter three regarding the employment of a qualitative paradigm in relation to the research topic and the field of counselling psychology, the above facets of intensive interviewing as a qualitative method for data gathering further support this choice.

#### *4.4.3 The interview guide*

The interview questions were constructed with the aim of exploring the topic at hand and the participants' experiences, while constantly focusing on the process (Charmaz, 2006). All interviews commenced with thanking the participant for taking place in the research study followed by a statement clarifying that the use of certain terms, such as sexuality, homosexuality, straight, bisexual, lesbian, gay, female, male

and others will be used in the interview solely for the purpose of facilitating communication, therefore if the participant does not use any of those terms, they should feel free to comment on that and tell me about it.

The following are the open-ended questions used in the research:

- How do you identify your gender and sexuality, and what led to that identification? Or not?
- Tell me about the different types of intimate and sexual relationships you have had?
- What does it mean to you to have different types of intimate and sexual relationships?
- How would you describe yourself (attitudes, behaviours...) when you are in a relationship with a woman? And when you are in a relationship with a man? Or individuals of other genders?
- How do you experience the shift from a relationship with one partner to another?
- Could you tell me about how your previous and/or current partners react to your bisexual experiences?

The above interview guide was modified several times in the process of data gathering and analysis based on the emerging concepts (Birks & Mills, 2011) as well as reflections on mistakes made in interviewing skills. The questions also reflect the symbolic interactionism perspective with its stress on eliciting data that helps learning about the experiences and actions of the participants, as well as their personal views (Charmaz, 2006).

## 4.5 Data analysis methods

### 4.5.1 *Data analysis methods and research topic*

The methods adopted for analysing data were further in line with the research question. These methods, which will be discussed shortly, included the analysis of processes, a very significant aspect of grounded theory. The term process in grounded theory refers to linking chronological sequences that have apparent starting and ending points. These single chronological sequences are then linked to provide a bigger picture of the phenomenon under exploration (Charmaz, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain that in analysing data for process “instead of looking for properties, one is purposefully looking at action/interaction and noting movement, sequence, and change as well as how it evolves (changes or remains the same) in response to changes in context or conditions” (p. 167). An important facet of my study is to understand how bisexual women’s behaviours and attitudes may or may not change or differ in the process of moving from one relationship to another and to account for how this occurs. Hence, by linking the experiences of each relationship to another, the aim was to construct a broader picture that sheds light on differences and similarities in experiences as well as how bisexual women understand these changes.

### 4.5.2 *Analytic process*

The constructivist grounded theory methodology includes analysis methods as means of studying and defining the data generated. These methods revolve around breaking down the raw data into concepts that are designated to stand for categories, which are then developed and integrated into the final grounded theory. This includes using methods for coding, memo writing, theoretical sorting, diagramming and integrating (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theory process however is not a

completely linear one, and the data collection and analysis occur concurrently (Birks & Mills, 2011). This section outlines the analytic methods implemented as a way of setting the scene for the next chapter, which illustrates the analysis using these methods. Figure 4.2 below illustrates the analysis process and methods.

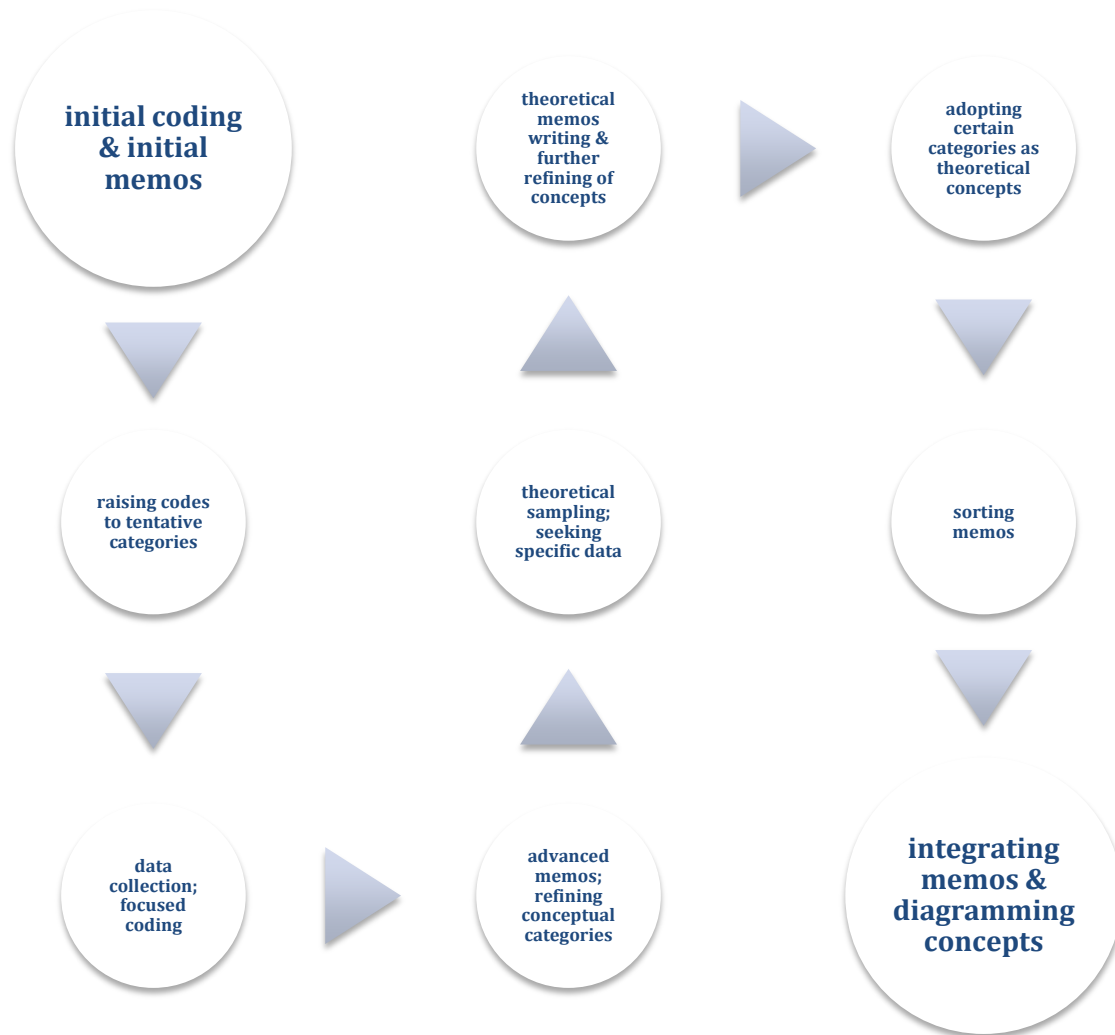


Figure 4.2: analytic process

#### 4.5.3 Coding: initial, focused and theoretical

Grounded theory is viewed as categorical implying the direction of its analysis is geared towards developing concepts (Birks & Mills, 2011). There are different types of coding methods used at different stages of the analytic process, yet their overall purpose is to name pieces of the data that allow the data to be categorised and

summarised forming the initial framework of the analysis (Holton, 2007). This study's analysis of data is based on three coding methods inherent to the constructivist grounded theory model: initial, focused and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding was the first step after data generation commenced; it sticks closely to the data rather than applying pre-existing categories, and focuses on actions. Treating the data analytically required that some questions, suggested by Charmaz (2006), were constantly asked of the data during initial coding. Some of these questions include: What is the data a study of? What does the data suggest and pronounce and from whose point of view? And what does the specific data indicate about a theoretical category? (ibid).

I also adopted line-by-line coding for interview transcriptions. Line-by-line coding is naming each line of the data (Glaser, 1978). This method was used primarily due to its relevance to the generated data, which consisted of the participants telling their stories about relationships and partners and further brought processes of the interrelatedness of sexual and gender identifications and relationships styles into light. Charmaz (2003) argues that using line-by-line coding helps the researcher from implicating the data with their own personal issues or motives. It further allowed the data to be broken down to parts that began to reveal properties and assisted in comparing data and identifying gaps (Charmaz, 2006).

In vivo codes were also applied during initial coding to some segments of the data as means of preserving certain terms used by participants and allowing the coding to remain close to the data (Charmaz, 2006). The developed coding categories aimed at demonstrating the experiences of the participants and compared the data derived from all of the participants' interviews in order to define conceptual

categories. These categories then pointed out to gaps in the data that were lacking, thus theoretical sampling took place.

Focused coding was the next step in which the most significant previous codes were synthesised, and then larger data segments were explained in order to determine the sufficiency of the codes through a process of filtering the data (Birks & Mills, 2011). These codes were more selective and directed than the previous initial codes and aimed to raise the codes to a conceptual level. The emerging major categories from these focused codes were then given subcategories that portrayed the links between them aiming to make sense of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Below is an example of how once the first interview was conducted as part of the initial sampling, the initial line-by-line coding ensued from the verbatim. Focused coding followed as means of using the most significant and frequent initial codes to sort, synthesise and organize the data (Charmaz, 2006).

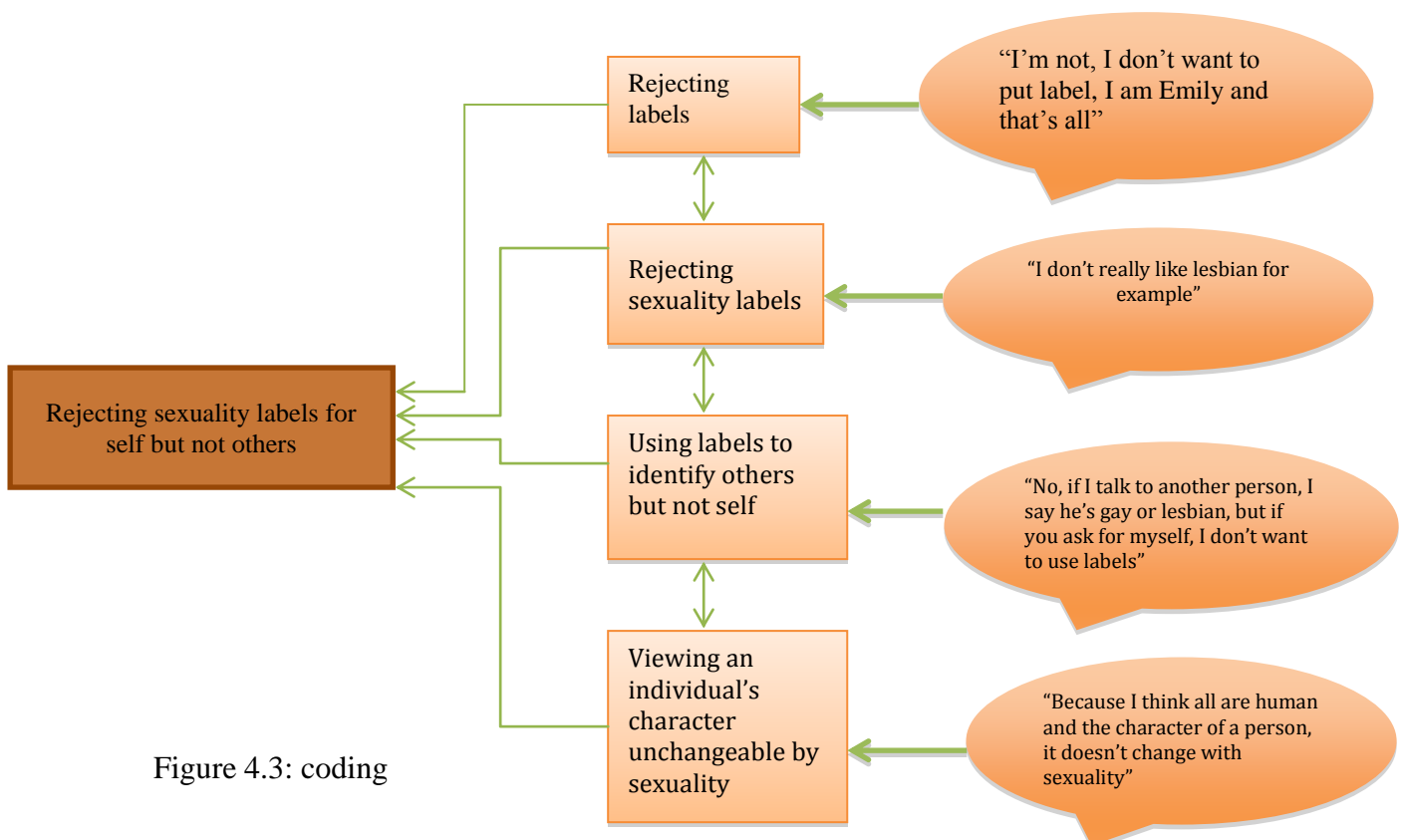


Figure 4.3: coding



The figure above illustrates how the focused code 'rejecting sexuality labels for self but not others' emerged from the assembling of similar initial codes that pertained to the participant's statements. A similar process took place for all the interview transcription resulting in 10 focused codes:

Focused codes interview 1: Emily	
1.	<b>Rejecting sexuality labels for self but not others</b>
2.	<b>Differentiating feelings towards men and women</b>
3.	<b>Influences on relationship type preference due to homonegativity in society and family</b>
4.	<b>Effects of conforming to heterosexual relationships on self</b>
5.	<b>Process of self-acceptance influenced by age and experience</b>
6.	<b>Viewing gender based on feminine and masculine traits</b>
7.	<b>Differences in sexuality disclosure based on partner's gender</b>
8.	<b>Physical attraction to both genders</b>
9.	<b>Effects of shared experiences on partner and relationship choices</b>
10.	<b>Effects of own sexuality on partner and relationship choices and feelings</b>

Table 4.3: focused codes

As a result of the several focused codes that emerged from the first two interviews, I began to employ comparative methods. Through comparing codes between the first two interviews some tentative categories began to emerge out of constantly interrogating the relationships between the codes in order to enhance conceptual understanding (Charmaz, 2006). Below is an example of how some focused codes were raised to tentative categories.

<b>Focused codes from interview 1</b>	<b>Focused codes from interview 2</b>	<b>Tentative categories</b>
Rejecting sexuality labels for self and not others	Different uses and purposes for sexuality labels	Using or rejecting sexuality labels for personal reasons
Differentiating between feelings towards male and female partners	Differentiating feelings and behaviours between male and female partners	Differentiating feeling and behaviours based on partner's gender
Self-acceptance influenced by age and experiences	Effects of homo-negativity on self-acceptance and changes with age and experiences	Process of self-acceptance influenced by growing older and experiences
Differences in disclosing sexuality based on partner's gender	Disclosing sexuality influenced by partner's gender and sexuality	Disclosing sexuality based on partner's gender and sexuality
Effects of shared experiences on partner and relationship choices  Effects of own sexuality on partner and relationship choices and feelings	Gender similarity creating shared experiences and understanding  Bisexuality viewed as threatening to male and female partners, straight and lesbian	Interplay between individual's sexuality and gender and those of partner's influencing relationship experiences

Table 4.4: raising codes to tentative categories

Finally, theoretical coding was used to specify the apparent relationships between the developed categories and their sub-categories from the focused codes (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical coding gave coherence and integration to the focused codes and allowed the analytic story to move in a theoretical direction. Theoretical integration followed as means of assembling these codes together and giving form, precision and clarity to the focused codes. This was achieved by specifying certain conditions and contexts in which particular actions, changes and processes occurred

and showing the resulting consequences (Holton, 2007; Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006).

Moreover, constant comparative methods were used throughout the different stages of the analytic process. This implied comparing data generated from different interviews and within the same interview to look for similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The purpose of constant comparison is to make sure that the data continues to support the emerging categories and prevents the collection of redundant data once a category is saturated (Holton, 2012), also preventing 'data overwhelm' (Glaser, 2003).

#### *4.5.4 Memo writing: initial and advanced*

Alongside the coding process and progressively with it, memos were written. Memo writing is an essential method in grounded theory as it encourages the researcher to begin analysing data from the earliest stages of the research process (Glaser, 1998). Through memo writing, data and codes were analysed allowing the identification of important codes that formed theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing commenced with the initial coding, helped explicate and develop focused codes, while constantly making comparisons between the data.

Early memos were used for identifying important codes, exploring them to look for processes and emerging categories. More advanced memos were written as the analysis progressed, which further included looking for analytic properties in the categories and identifying patterns (Charmaz, 2006, Strauss & Glaser, 1970).

Alongside memo writing, and more often prior to it and assisting it, was the use of clustering techniques. Clustering provides a flexible, visual and non-linear method for organising and understanding data (Rico, 1983). Clustering was adopted to map

out a category or focused code and its defining properties in order to clarify the relationships between them (Charmaz, 2006). Below is an example of clustering based on interview 3.

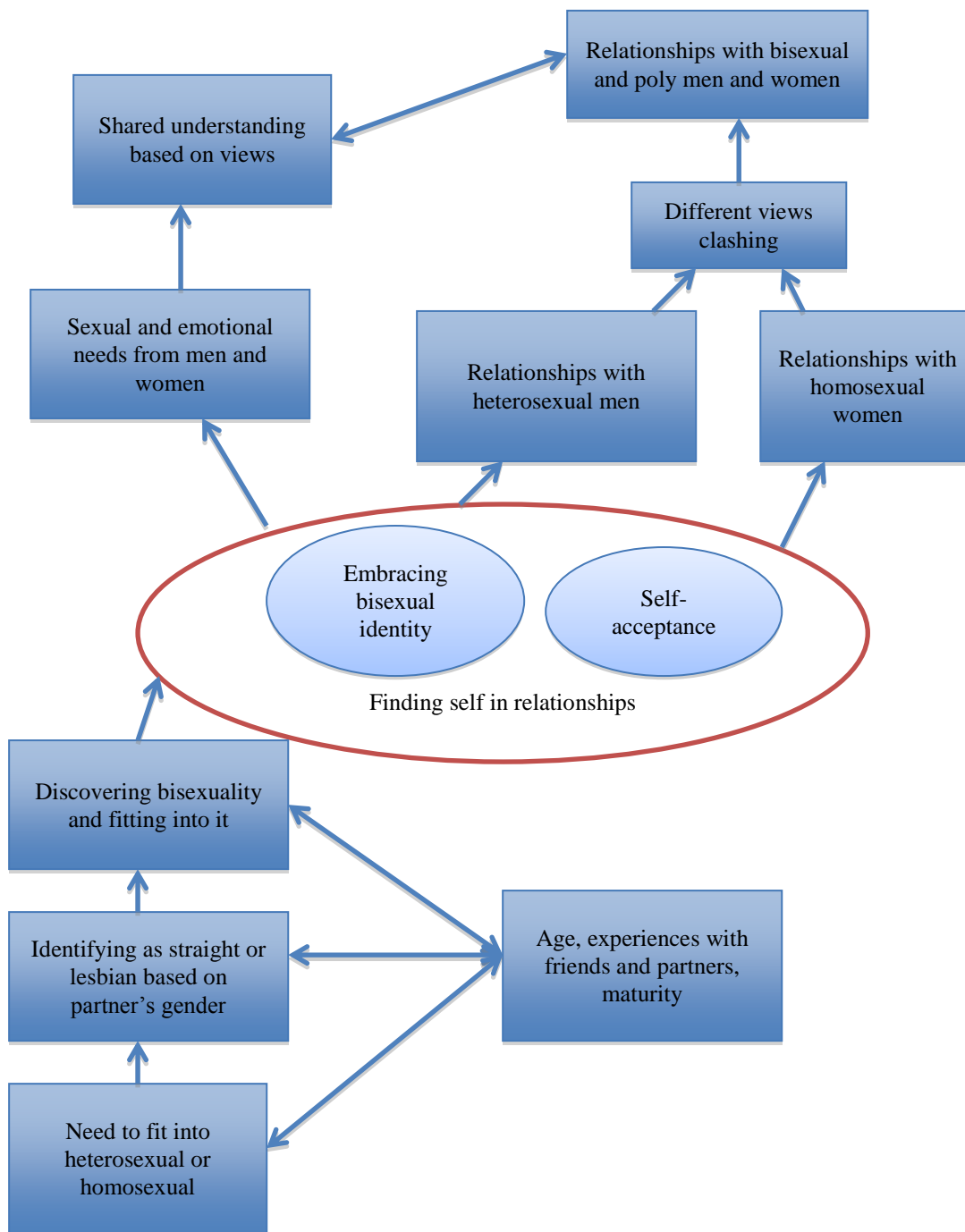


Figure 4.4: Clustering

#### 4.5.5 Raising focused codes to conceptual categories

Through the process of memo writing, some codes were treated as conceptual categories that were analysed and developed. “A category is a conceptual element in a theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.37). This was done by assessing which codes were accurate representations of the data, which were then raised to conceptual categories in memos. The categories formed ways of elucidating processes, ideas and events and consisted of a selection of codes that had common themes and patterns (Charmaz, 2006). The table below presents the compilation of focused codes across all interviews that were assembled resulting in the emergence of one of the three main categories<sup>10</sup>.

<b>Category 1: Spatial negotiation of sexual self</b>	
<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focused Codes</b>
<b>P1 Emily</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rejecting sexuality labels for self but not others</li> <li>Self-acceptance influenced by age and experiences</li> </ul>
<b>P2 Sara</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Different uses and purposes for sexuality labels</li> <li>Effects of homo-negativity on self-acceptance and changes with age and experiences</li> </ul>
<b>P3 Laura</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Process of sexual identification influenced by age, relationship and other experiences, and maturity</li> <li>Personal meaning of identifying as bisexual achieved through process</li> </ul>
<b>P4 Becky</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Process of sexual identification, from straight, no identification to bisexual; influenced by age, growing openness to sexuality and to divorce leading to questioning</li> <li>Identifying as bisexual after exploring meanings and finding overlaps between bisexuality concept and aspects of self; influenced greatly by finding and belonging in a community</li> <li>Viewing sexuality labels and definitions as shaping the individual, uses for convenience</li> <li>Viewing labelling as limiting and not indicative of person's individuality as well as finding terms confusing</li> </ul>
<b>P5 Christina</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changes of sexuality identification, bisexual to queer, affected by questioning sexuality, learning about sexualities, attractions and age</li> </ul>
<b>P6 Sophie</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changing sexual identification from heterosexual, to heteroflexible, to current 70 heterosexual and 30 bisexual</li> <li>Defining sexuality primarily due to society rather than self</li> <li>Process achieved through an inner negotiation of her attractions and societal impositions of self-defining</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> The tables for categories 2 and 3 are found in appendices

<b>P7 Jay</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experimenting with different identity terms after first attraction to other gender, changing from pansexual to bisexual</li> <li>• Placing importance on finding a home in a community rather than importance of term and gaining strength in shared sense of identity</li> </ul>
<b>P8 Mary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing sexuality identification from straight to bisexual after realising attraction to women and facilitated by partner and going to bisexual spaces</li> <li>• Missing being with women when only with men, poly, viewing her bisexuality as being with men and women</li> </ul>
<b>P9 Sandra</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing sexual identification from assumed heterosexuality to fluid</li> <li>• Using term fluid due to realising attraction to women at older age</li> </ul>

Table 4.5: Focused codes forming category 1

#### 4.5.6 Saturating theoretical categories

Grounded theory data gathering stops based on the achievement of theoretical saturation of categories. While theoretical sampling continues as means of generating data that focuses on the emerging theoretical categories, once new data does not reveal new properties or theoretical insights of the core theoretical categories, this entails that categories are saturated (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser (2001) defines saturation as the point whereby comparisons between the data cease to produce new properties of the emerging patterns, hence giving the categories enough solidity to build up the final grounded theory.

#### 4.5.7 Theoretical sorting, diagramming and integrating

The final step in the analysis of grounded theory is the interrelated process of theoretical sorting, diagramming and integrating. Theoretical sorting follows from the memos that have been written and acts as means of refining, linking and integrating the categories. On the other hand, diagramming provides visual representations of the categories, sub-categories and the relationships amongst them. Finally, the integration of memos comprising of categories and sub-categories forms

the grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). Based on these analytic methods, data from the interviews were analysed forming the grounded theory, which will be presented in detail in the next chapter, while also using illustrations of the several techniques demonstrating and clarifying the analytic process.

## Chapter V: Analysis and Comparative Literature

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter, following from the analysis methods in chapter four<sup>11</sup>, illustrates how the constructivist grounded theory methodology and methods were used to generate a theory on women's relationships in the context of bisexuality. Definitions of 'theory' vary amongst theorists and reflect their underlying philosophical stances (Birks & Mills, 2011). In this research study, theory is defined within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism as the integration of concepts that aims at an increased understanding of the area of enquiry through the novel contribution it provides (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005). The final grounded theory "analytically theorises how meanings, actions and social structures are constructed" (Charmaz, 2006, p.151), and was the result of identifying three main categories from the emergent data and linking them together.

In order to set the scene for this chapter and facilitate navigation through the analysis, a succinct introduction explaining the relationship between the three categories, the four dimensions of spatial negotiation and the final grounded theory is first provided. The three major categories are: 'spatial negotiation of sexual self', 'prism of experiences; refractions through an-other'<sup>12</sup>, and 'techniques of the relationship'. The categories represent the three primary themes that explain and account for the final grounded theory. Category one primarily reflects how participants have negotiated their sexual self in a process describing the change from

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<sup>11</sup> For quick reference refer to pages 84-93

<sup>12</sup> The hyphen used in 'an-other' reflects the social constructionist epistemology in the emergence of category 2. 'an-other' stands for the position of the object (partner in this case) from which the imposition of meaning on the subject (participants) results in the way meanings are constructed, hence showing the interplay in creation of meaning between subject and object.



heterosexual to non-heterosexual identifications. In return the negotiation of sexual self was interrelated with their emotional and sexual experiences throughout their lives with partners of multiple sexualities and genders, the theme comprising category two. These experiences have shaped the participants' current preferences for bisexual partners due to experiencing more satisfying relationships as a result of sharing values, views and beliefs that allow them to experience sexual visibility, an intelligible and authentic identity in relation to their bisexual attractions, and an overall acceptance of who they are. The ways in which the sexual, emotional and social experiences are negotiated in a relationship account for the techniques employed and form category three.

Underlying these three categories, it was evident that a process of negotiation was occurring accounting for the participants' actions, feelings and behaviours. The process of spatial negotiation was further divided into four dimensions each reflecting the specific properties involved in the three categories. However, all four dimensions are interrelated and interdependent upon each other. Self-with-self negotiation includes aspects relating to the internal negotiation that occurs at all times and changes throughout an individual's life. Self-with-society negotiation accounts for how meanings are negotiated based on societal factors such as gender views, upbringing in the family and influences of heteronormative and non-heteronormative communities on the further constructions and negotiations of meanings. Self-with-partner relates to the specific experiences with partners throughout the individual's life, which in their turn have been negotiated throughout. Finally, self-with-relationship is more specific to the contemporary relationships with bisexual partners based on continuous negotiations resulting in the achievement of the individual's desired state of being. Hence, the final grounded theory emerged as means of joining

the three categories and the spatial negotiations together and is described as: women's bisexual experiences in contemporary relationships constructed within a sphere of spatial negotiations geared towards achieving their desired sexual, emotional and social existence with bisexual partners.

The next section of this chapter introduces an overview of the process through which the three main categories emerged from the analysis. Furthermore, each category is represented in relation to its subcategories and properties, and supported by extracts from the raw data. The process of theoretical integration linking all three categories is assimilated throughout. However, a more detailed account is given in the last section while setting the scene for chapter six in conceptualising the grounded theory. Additionally, and in accord with grounded theory methodology and methods, a comparison between the main themes that emerged from the analysis and the existing literature in the field is provided throughout (Charmaz, 2006).

## **5.2 Three main categories**

The three emergent categories from the data theorising the final grounded theory are: spatial negotiation of sexual self, prism of experiences; refractions through an-other, and techniques of the relationship. All categories began to form early on in the data generation process and analysis, and through continuous theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation developed into main categories (Charmaz, 2006; Birks & Mills, 2011). Moreover, through constant comparative analysis of initial and focused codes between the same interview and across interviews, subcategories emerged explicating aspects of each category and properties illustrating their varying dimensions (ibid). Three diagrams are provided after each category in the form of a visual summary of the category, its subcategories, properties and theoretical codes.

The emergent theoretical codes illustrate the relationships between the subcategories and properties, while moving each category into its theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006). This type of analytic refinement, which involves illustrating the categories relationships to other concepts, was used as a tool to raise the categories into theoretical concepts (ibid).

### **5.3 Category one: spatial negotiation of sexual self**

This category represents the process underlying the participants' experiences of choosing, or not choosing, a sexual identity. The reasoning behind asking women about their sexual identifications was originally, in the initial sampling, a means of gathering demographic data. However, after coding the first two interviews I began to notice the connections between reasons for not choosing a sexual identity and other factors such as societal influences and friendships in the accounts of participants, and consequences upon their feelings and actions in their intimate relationships. Taking into account that the first two participants are partners, both Greek and living in the UK, I therefore decided to explore these issues in more depth, and commenced my theoretical sampling with a participant who chose a bisexual identity in search of possible similarities and differences. I began to notice that choosing, or not, a sexual identity goes beyond what I initially saw as a process of sexual identification.

Actions such as questioning heterosexuality, learning and understanding about other sexualities, and exploring different relationship styles have been constructed in a space incorporating societies, families, friends, and relationships. These extracts illustrate how the participants have gone through the process of negotiating their sexual selves:

P3 Laura:

My sexuality has changed as I got older (...) <sup>13</sup> When I was younger, I knew I was attracted to females, but I also knew I was attracted to men and I was really confused and I knew I needed to choose one or the other. I'm either straight or I'm gay. I knew I didn't fit (...) probably age 13/15, and always felt I had to choose and even up to late teens and think I'd have to be one or the other. And I went through a time where I thought I was a lesbian and that felt very comfortable. So I think it's just that you grow older and you really understand yourself more really (...) I think it's just being comfortable with myself.

P9 Sandra:

I used to think I'm confined to heterosexuality (...) Well up to about 8 years ago. Very occasionally, I'd have a moment, no more than a moment I think, of fancying a women. But so fleetingly that I almost didn't notice it. (...) If I had been bisexual back then I would have repressed it because it's inconvenient (...) So you know maybe with society having moved on quite a bit as well over my lifetime.

P6 Sophie:

I think more later on when just maybe from reading, from talking with friends, from having girlfriends who were lesbians, I just kind of wondering about Would I? Would I be? Am I interested? Do I look at women like this? Am I? I never really thought about it you see (...) It's almost as if you put another gender aside, you know (...) it's like it's easier to actually then see the progression towards sexual or intimate relationship.

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<sup>13</sup> (...) stands for showing when statements didn't follow directly after each other, or for questions I posed for clarification which are omitted in the extracts.

P5 Christina:

I think it's pretty hard wired, you know my, at least my sexual orientation, it took me a long time to identify as bisexual, kind of like be aware of what the word meant, but like I remember being quite young, like 8 or 9 and wondering what does gay mean, what does lesbian mean and feeling a draw towards those identities and wanting to know more about them. Not necessarily identify myself, but knowing that there was something there I needed to know more about. And like my crushes that I had, though I might have not been able to identify them as a crush, I would've been attracted to boys and girls.

The above extracts highlight first how constructing a non-heterosexual identity constitutes a challenge due to the heteronormative societies that have in their turn constructed heterosexuality as the norm. Moreover, as Laura states her feeling of having to choose, further illustrates how bisexuality may fall out of the common dyadic sexuality system. <links 1,2,3<sup>14</sup>>

The indication of becoming comfortable with oneself and accepting oneself in relation to the society, family and friends, also came up for those who chose not to identify with a sexuality. The influence of family was most pronounced with the two Greek participants pointing towards a possible cultural influence:

P1 Emily:

Maybe I was doing it (*being only with men*)<sup>15</sup> because it is normal, I was trying to be normal (...) I think my relationships and friends, and me first of all because I accept who I am, and I

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<sup>14</sup><Links> refers to links between the extracts and other categories. For example some of the properties contributing to the sexual identification such as age, heteronormative society influences, and meeting individuals of other sexualities, are also related to category 2 in relation to understandings of gender which in return influences emotional and sexual experiences, and to category 3 in how these form part of the techniques of being in a current relationship.

<sup>15</sup>(*words in italic*) refer to my words for clarification of subject discussed

don't think it's not normal now (...) and different years, I think because everywhere and everyone they say this is not normal, but now it's more comfortable about gay and lesbian.

P2 Sara:

I had not accepted myself (...) the acceptance of wanting women mostly and men. I think I've fallen in love with a man only once, but mostly I had relationships with male partners because that's what was accepted (...) the society, my family.

Unlike Emily and Sara, who experienced their attraction to women initially as “not normal” due to societal and family's views, Sophie, describes an acceptance in her family about same-sex intimacy. Yet, her account illustrates how the heteronormative family structure still impacted her sexuality negotiation:

P6 Sophie:

I'm a child of the 80's, there's not that many LGBT awareness (...) even if we were in a very relaxed environment where you wouldn't have had no problem in expressing it I think. In France you had, we were fairly at ease with sexuality to start with so. But, I was still in maybe, heteronormative family, there was no negative talks about other genders or there was no fun-making (...) there's no stigmatization of the, of different sexuality at all (...) But I still grew up where my reference point was 'man and woman' so father would be like “So you're in high school, you start sex” and it's not that I wasn't attracted by women, well I, I didn't ask myself the question (...) And then I think, maybe just simply growing up, travelling made me a bit more at ease and then just kind of, started looking at women and thinking “Oh! Actually.” First, you know building friendly relationships and then starting to appreciate the gender.

For Sophie growing up in an age where LGBT awareness was limited and being conditioned to perceive women in a non-sexual way, followed by openness to other ways of looking at women through growing older, form parts of how her constructions of intimacy with women developed. As for Laura and Christina, in the extracts below, it was more about finding an identity where they fit, which was facilitated by meeting bisexual partners.

P3 Laura:

I met a partner and he was bisexual as well and it was easy for us to understand.

P5 Christina:

I first kissed and cuddled with girls when I was around 11 or 12 but it took me a long time to kind of put that together as, and I think probably its because such a social message, and media is so heterocentric that it took me a long time to recognise that as an attraction, as it is the same thing as an attraction to boys, because there was the attraction to boys that we're conditioned to, like you know I have a crush on him and now I can go into it but you don't get the same messages about relationships with women. So as I progressed, first I identified with bi when I was 18 19 (...) I thought I was straight, and then I had my first boyfriend (...) he was bisexual (...) and now that I knew a bisexual person I began to identify with it more.

Laura's and Christina's accounts show how meeting bisexual partners helped them in understanding, identifying and becoming comfortable with their sexuality. Christina, similar to Sara, Emily and Sophie explains how the "heterocentric" society impacted her late bisexual identification. <links 1,3>

The participants, having been involved in intimate and sexual relationships with men and with women, have all moved away from a heterosexual identification, yet this did not necessarily result in a bisexual identification. While some did embrace a bisexual identity, others chose other terms for multiple individual reasons, which primarily reflected their meanings of their sexualities, in addition to some of the properties already discussed above. On the other hand, there were those who chose not to identify with any sexuality term. The choices made in choosing or not choosing a term to identify their sexualities overlapped in some cases and diverted in others. For most participants their reasoning showed a level of reflexivity that occurred at times when they began to realise their attraction to other women, and continues throughout their lives being moulded by a variety of conditions and experiences:

P1 Emily:

I'm not, I don't want to put label, I am Emily and that's all, I don't really like lesbian for example (...) if you ask for myself, I don't want to use labels (...) because I think all are human and the character of a person, it doesn't change with sexuality.

P2 Sara:

I don't see that I'm gay or straight or bisexual, I prefer to be me just like that (...) I believe that we can do anything we want and we refer to ourselves as we want, and we don't have to label ourselves (...) I think that a lot of people, usually those just who, because they do not have the same sexual orientation or they are afraid of different one, they use labels in a mean way, not in a good way (...) For me at least the last, for four years I've only been with women, and it's not something like I say I



choose this, it's just that these people with whom I had relationships made me fall in love with them <links 1, 2 and 3>

Emily and Sara, who are partners, both chose not to identify with any sexuality term or use a label. They both share the same view that labels are not useful in describing an individual. In addition, their views seem to have been constructed due to their experiences with family, friends, society and culture, which have not been tolerant towards same-sex relationships. On the other hand, Becky in the extract below, although identifies as bisexual, shares a similar view on the unnecessary use of labels, but her views have been constructed differently:

P4 Becky:

I would identify as bisexual now (...) Because I tend not to use labels so much, it's just things are what they are, and my philosophy would be, it's not about gender, it's about the person, without actually labelling it as bisexual, and then I came to Bicon last year and there are labels everywhere, it's like ah here's that's what I am, the forms that you use, there's always these boxes to tick, and it's like what box am I going to tick, I need to call it something, so that's why I started to say bisexual, but it's more of a philosophy rather than a label (...) Yeah most labels are just a convenience thing. (...) For me it's just, it's not about gender, I just think gender is like hair colour, it's like an aspect of the personality, that's how I would use it to mean bisexual.

P5 Christina

I'm bisexual, I also identify as queer, which for me also encompasses more than just sexual orientation (...) Bisexual is, I'm sexually and romantically attracted to people of multiple genders. I've had lovers who are male, female, that would be sis

male, transmale (...). Very much so in terms of community, I mean I love being here at BiCon, because I find a community of people who kind of get it, who have no particular expectations of gender identity or gender performance or who I will or won't be interested in sexually and I find that really comforting. Recognising what is of you in other people that you don't necessarily see in the other community.

Becky's account highlights her personal philosophy on sexuality while also stressing the bisexual and larger communities' influences on the need to choose a sexual identity. Christina on the other hand, and due to her own involvement in the queer community, illustrates her awareness of multiple genders, rather than two genders, which further shows the community's role in the construction of her bisexual self. The importance of the bisexual community for Christina is another contributing factor to her positive sense of bisexual identity. <links 1,2,3>

While for Becky being bisexual means "it's not about the gender", for both Laura and Mary the gender is an important aspect in their bisexual identification as their extracts below show: <links 1,2>

P3 Laura:

I'm bisexual, I'm attracted to both male and female and I can have a relationship with either male or female.

P8 Mary:

Bisexual, I like to have relationships with men and women. And some people don't like the term bisexual because it implies only two genders, but I've found that I am usually interested in those two genders and not particularly in-between so, I'm quite happy with the term.

Differently, Sophie and Sandra have chosen other terms to define their sexualities based on other experiences and the ways in which they understand themselves in relation to the world:

P6 Sophie:

I never really liked to identify precisely just because the way I would define myself when asked is that at first you know I was more heterosexual to start with, and then it was more progression and we used, I used the word more like 'heteroflexible' as opposed to you know, I appreciate that the term bisexual meaning you know I've had relationships with both men and women, but if I was to define myself I'm more of a 70/30. More 70% heterosexual and 30% bisexual to a certain extent (...) That's more 'heteroflexible' that's why I used that term it's always interesting being here in 'BiCon' or being in more precisely bisexual environment when I was like it's my sexuality but I don't need to define it, it's how I enjoy it and how I feel confident in it.

P9 Sandra:

I think these days I probably would just say fluid (...) it feels like I added something on to what I was. So I don't feel like I've lost heterosexuality, I feel like I have added this on (...) Like I can feel attraction to both. But in terms of my own personal experience of this happening historically so late in my life, it feels more like, oh, I've begun to feel more fluid (...) It might change again of course but that's why I'm using that word.

Both Sandra and Sophie explain their current sexualities as a move from heterosexuality to the place in which they are now, choosing terms that reflect their experiences of that process. <links1,3> For Sandra age is an important factor in the

reason for choosing to identify as “fluid” as well as her experience of herself as a previously heterosexually identified woman. Whereas with Sophia “the progression” she talks of indicates not only an age factor, but more the experience of herself in relation to her previous heterosexual identity, which now is “heteroflexible”. In addition, her involvement in a bisexual community further assists her in this construction as she experiences confidence in this environment.

### *5.3.1 Overview of category one*

Category one represents the spatial negotiation of a sexual self based on two closely interrelated processes, denoted as subcategories (figure 5.1), whereas the properties provide the different dimensions forming the spatial aspect of the negotiation. In negotiating a sexual self, the participants have each uniquely done so, however, it appeared that certain factors have been common to most of them contributing and influencing their individual negotiations. These factors are described as the properties in this category and include aspects such as age, maturity, relationship experiences, family and friends, societal norms and views. The diagram<sup>16</sup> below provides a visual representation and summary of category one.

The accounts of the participants illustrated in this category reflect some existing ideas within the literature on bisexuals and identification. For instance, all the participants have either accepted their sexual and emotional attractions towards women at a later stage in life, or/and identified as bisexual at a later stage. Research shows that usually bisexuals ‘come out’ at later stages in comparison to gays and lesbians (Fox, 1995; Rust 1997; Weinberg, Williams & Prior, 1994). This delayed

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<sup>16</sup> The diagrams are colour coded showing the intersections across categories, subcategories and properties. Example all red boxes are links used to integrate different aspects in each category into the final grounded theory.

coming out has been attributed to the society's dichotomous understanding of sexuality as well as the lack of knowledge and support for bisexuals (Rust, 1993; Weinberg et. al., 1994). The participants' accounts in this study do reflect aspects of these issues in relation to their bisexual attractions and identifications. Moreover, the differences in choices of terms despite the common factor of all participants having been involved in sexual and intimate relationships with men and women reflect the diversity of what the term bisexuality stands for (Callis, 2012; Hemmings, 2002).

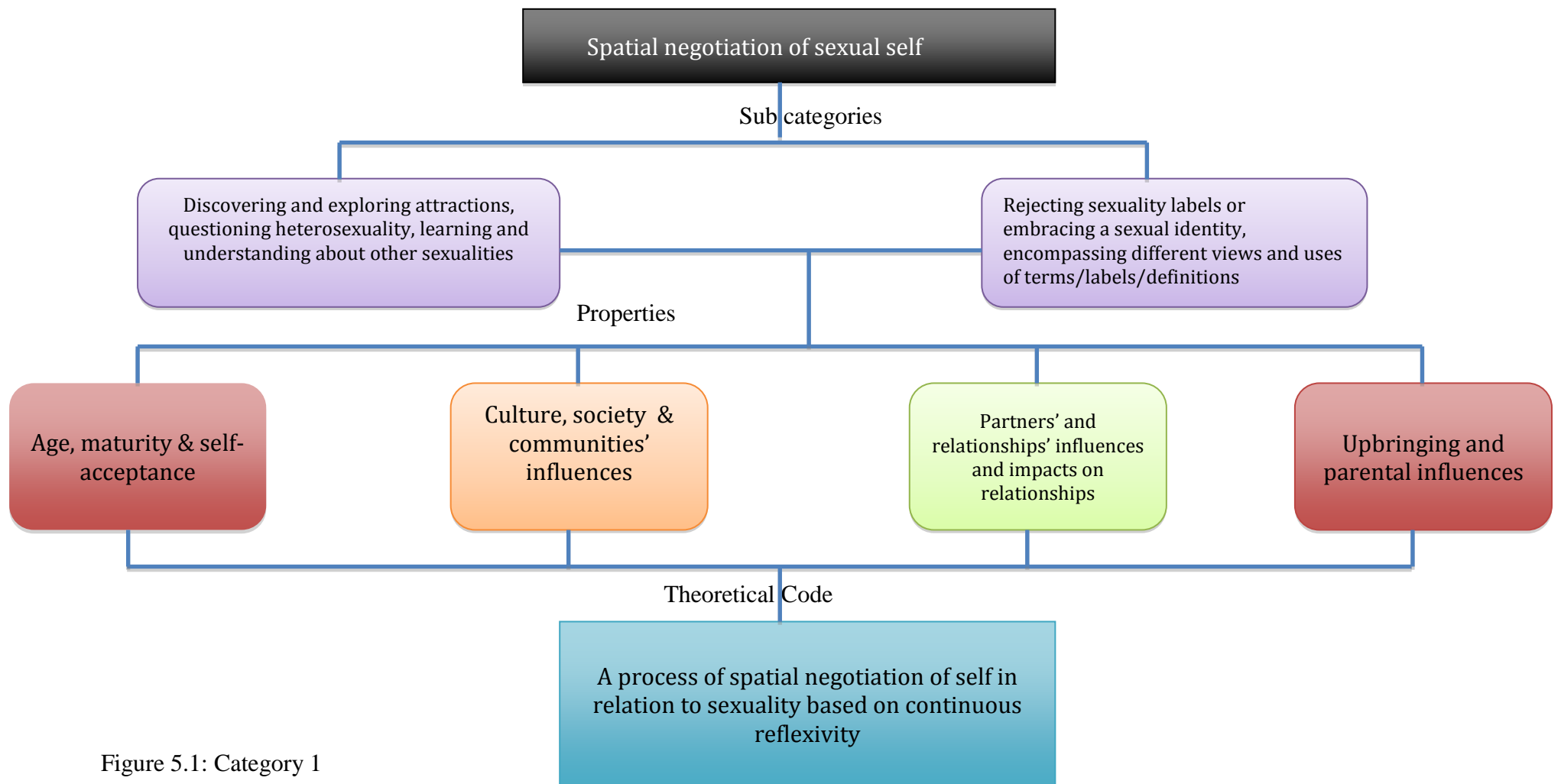


Figure 5.1: Category 1

#### **5.4 Category two: prism of experiences; refractions through an-other**

This category accounts primarily for the ways in which the participants understand and construct meanings of their behaviours, attitudes and emotions in relation to their partners. When asking participants about how they experienced themselves in relation to their partners, sexual/physical and emotional experiences dominated the narratives. These experiences were in their turn predicated upon gender identifications, views and understandings of gender, and differed based on the individual's sexuality, age, upbringing, culture and other aspects. <links 1,2,3> The first three participants identified their gender as female and/or woman, and at that point I didn't question what this meant to them. Through theoretical sampling I began to ask what led to this gender identification, as it appeared that the ways the participants experienced their partners emotionally and sexually further intersected and shed light upon how the experiences were construed in their relationships, and the pertained consequences.

In identifying their gender, several aspects were common amongst all participants, starting with the physical anatomy they were born with, their upbringing and socialisation into a gender, and for some a political affiliation with the gender:

P4 Becky:

Female (...) I never really questioned it, I'm a girl (...)  
Socialisation, upbringing, anatomy.

P5 Christina:

I started to think about that a lot recently actually. I identify with women as kind of biological identity, as a political identity, I don't think I really have much of an internal sense of having a gender (...) Biological level is medically, you know like my medical needs, my physiology, my level of strength and so on.

P6 Sophie:

Female. (...) It's more about the way from I grew up, from the way I experienced sexuality first to then awareness of different types of gender and things like this and just, realizing yea, identifying as a woman, I feel confident as a woman I've no questioning about my birth gender (...) Like for me, gender was something you, you first were born with and then you have the option to actually decide if you wanted to change or not.

P7 Jay<sup>17</sup>:

I identify as male almost all the time but I think there are parts of me that kind of, quite feminine sometimes. (...) I think it's just that it's one of those things that it feels wrong but it's just being a default assumption because, because you know, I'm physically male. And I haven't really, I haven't really questioned or challenged that terribly much.

P8 Mary:

Well, I was born a female, and I, I suppose I questioned a little bit when I, after I'd been to a couple of BiCon's and thought, did I want to experiment at all. But after thinking that for a while I decided it wasn't really me, so I stuck with human (...) and I suppose my upbringing as well. I was called a female name and dressed as a girl and yeah, my family.

P9 Sandra:

Female (...) lifelong unquestionable alignment with my biology. (...) Well I'm almost 65, so I grew up in an age where these

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<sup>17</sup> Jay is in a polyamorous relationship with Laura who is also in a relationship with Becky (Becky and Jay are friends). Based on theoretical saturation and grounded theory methods, partners, friends or family members can be interviewed to provide further properties to a category. Jay was interviewed at this stage to obtain data that can saturate category 2 in relation to experiences of the partner, which further provided a more holistic understanding to influences of gender constructions on emotional and sexual experiences.



things weren't questioned at all. And although I have an androgynous name and was called a tomboy as a child, there was no question that I was treated as a girl both socially and psychologically in the family and in school. (...) And when the women's movement took off here in the late 1960s, I was very much part of that and I identified very strongly as a woman in a patriarchal society. And that has rather continued really. So being a woman is also a kind of political statement at times too.

The common aspect between all of the above participants is their view of a gender in relation to the physical, anatomical and/or sexed body that one is born with. Although several haven't questioned their birth gender, they are aware of how society, family and culture socialised them into their given birth gender <links 1,2,3>. The differentiation between a physically sexed body and a socialised gender appeared to infiltrate into the ways sexual and/or physical experiences were understood on the one hand, and emotional attractions towards a socialised gender on the other hand. Differences and similarities in bodies appeared to impact sexual experiences mainly:

P3 Laura:

I'm definitely specific to you know I've found something attractive in men and something attractive in women (...) Sexually its different because, because it just varies from one person, it's the partner, and they're just so different, because it's two different physical bodies so its not the same, emotionally as well.

P4 Becky:

I can't really compare and contrast I mean a male body feels quite different from a female body and it's just different. (...) They're physically different, I mean it just adds to it, this is what

I like about male bodies, and these are the bits I like about female bodies <links 1,2,3>

P5 Christina:

It would be very pronounced between my two partners at the moment, because XXX is tall and quite muscular and has a physical job, so he's got long blonde hair but he's a very traditional masculine frame, and so I kind of enjoy the feeling of muscle and physical strength, whereas XXX is taller than me and she's big, she's plus size but she's kind of very soft and squishy and cuddly, so I would experience contact with them differently.

While all the above accounts illustrate how the partners' physical bodies are experienced differently due to what seems to be an essentialist divide between male and female bodies, both Laura and Becky, who are partners and both identify as bisexual and poly, although with differing underlying views of bisexuality, share the view of finding different physical aspects attractive in male and female bodies. Their experiences are further linked to the negotiation of their sexual selves, and form an aspect of shared understanding upon which relationships are constructed which will be elaborated in the next section <links 1,2,3>.

On the other hand, sharing a basic similarity in female bodies brought out more experiences for some, however still in the realm of physical experience:

P4 Becky:

It's probably easier to relate to a female body than a male partner because you have one, so you know how it works and what's nice and what's not nice.

P2 Sara:

I think they (*women*) can also understand what I like, there are differences in women but they have explored their bodies and I have explored my body, there are a lot of similarities. I think it makes it (*sex*) more intense.

There were other participants who found that generally being with a female partner, and due to the similar gender, and gender here included aspects of both the sexed body and the socialised gender, this created a different emotional response in them and at times making them behave differently as well:

P2 Sara:

I think that women can better understand women (...) I think I don't know why though, with women, they make me give more from myself, more to reveal parts of myself. I'm not too sure if a man would like to hear so much (...) I think my behaviour is more sweet (...) I think when I am with women I am more emotional than with men. I think that because they also are emotional towards me (...) Yeah hugging talking and saying good things to your partner, showing your love, and through sex but also in everyday life.

P8 Mary:

I find that I can easily have something more casual, about physical stuff, with a man. But I find if I'm intimate with a woman I get more emotionally involved quickly (...) I think it could be because it feels, the intimacy, physical intimacy feels more, I feel more connection with a woman. I feel like it's more closely linked with emotions. And with a man it can just be something that's just physical (...) Falling in love, feeling like I want to share my feelings sooner, feeling more open more quickly (...) I feel like, as well, things tend to be more, more

tender with a woman, I think. And so, because it's gentler it feels like, more, a little bit more loving. More, more stroking, kissing (...) I think I tend to be more submissive with men, and more equal with women. I suppose I wait for a man to make the first move, for a date, or for a, in the you know, physically (...) Probably social conditioning.

P9 Sandra:

Uncharacteristically for me I found that once I began to be sexual with this woman I became very little womanly. Very girly. Happily letting her boss me about. I tell you if a man would done that I would've taken him on in sort of a feminist way. But there's something about being with a woman, whom I already respected and I knew respected me, that allowed me to explore a part of myself that was much more feminine.

The overlap in these accounts between the socialised gender and the birth gender carried notions of how women are perceived generally as having certain characteristics specific to them like tenderness. Also, this appears to have emotional impacts as well for these participants <links 1,2,3>.

Although the majority of participants have remained identified with their birth gender due to the way their eventual upbringing and socialisation was predicated upon this birth gender, the way this socialisation process occurred differed amongst them and appeared to impact their views on others' genders and eventually how they constructed meanings in their attractions to their partners. For instance, Becky and Christina's upbringing played a role in their current views on gender and sexuality, whereby they made a distinction between birth gender and gender expectations or roles:

P4 Becky:

My upbringing, was certainly, there was no, we were never, it was never different expectations for example, I got an older sister and a younger brother, and we were all treated equally and the expectations were the same, it wasn't the girls got to do this and the boys got to do that (...) and you know I just I don't like roles, it just irritates me, I just think you go do what you want to do and be what you want to be and really, and we don't live in Victorian times where you were really forced to be the girl, be the guy.

P5 Christina:

When I was growing up there was always more of an emphasis on what I was capable of intellectually and personally rather than anything about appearances. You know I don't remember being told that I was pretty as a little girl. The only compliments you were given by your parents is you look smart. You look clever or you look neat and tidy. So there's always been more of an emphasis on capability than on kind of those things that are more coded feminine.

Despite what appears as an egalitarian upbringing in relation to gender in both cases and the ways in which this impacted their views on gender, the consequences in relating were different between Christina and Becky underpinned by their differing views of their sexuality and gender <links 1,2,3>:

P4 Becky:

I guess because I sort of relate to the person and not the gender, so I probably, the men I relate to, they are not sort of macho rugby sporty, I don't like that type of men at all, they're probably, they'd be more like your girlfriends, they think on the same lines of things like what's important (...) They've got to

engage with you, you know, you're seen as a person and not I'm a guy or a girl and this is what blokes do and that's what you're supposed to do, not those stereotypes (...) Even the role I would take wouldn't differ at all, so it's not that if I'm with a male partner I behave like this in a certain role, or with a female partner, it's pretty much just the same.

P5 Christina:

I'm quite ambivalent about having a gender at all, I'm a me, I don't particularly want to play that game, and I like being able to present in different ways and express myself in different ways. So this weekend I'm reasonably femme, but there are days when I would bind or wear butch clothing (...) I find it really liberating, and sometimes I can feel a bit constrained by perceptions of what being female is, like in terms of codes of behaviour, being lady like, expectations of what you would do in terms of career or the whole, and I really like doing things like chopping wood with an axe and quite outdoorsy.

The interrelations between her upbringing, her views on gender, and her sexuality identification, for Becky developed a different process of relating to partners and experiencing her gender than for Christina who also identifies her gender as queer and thus creating a different way of relating to others and herself in relation to her gender:

P5 Christina:

I think in relationships with men, I still do have a tendency to default slightly to the feminine, again that may be a physical strength thing, but in the relationship with XXX for example, he expects me, and I like that, he expects me to be physically capable, carry luggage and not allowing him to do things like

that for me, but by default position, because of physical disparity, and he works in an outdoors job so he's quite, I do more of the lighter work and he does more of the heavier work, like when we're sharing space. Whereas with women, especially with XXX, because XXX is typically very femme, I tend to be a little bit butcher (...) I really enjoy those chivalrous acts of service, like opening doors or pulling out chairs, or running her a bath and so on. I kind of like being almost gentlemanly (...) Whereas when I'm with someone who presents as less femme, it is, I think that would highlight my own femme traits, I think you find different balances in relationships and my own gender is quite fluid, and I think I do respond to other people's gender presentation. <links 1,2, 3>

Similarly, Sophie found her sexual behaviour differing between women and men partners, however, her reasoning behind this differed from that of Christina's for whom its primarily related to her own gender fluidity:

P6 Sophie:

I found myself being more active as a sexual partner sometimes with females, which is kind of interesting and it's as if I put myself in the default 'guy' position (...) For me there's been like, as if the stereotype is in falling for a woman, I want a woman (...) there should be a feminine aspect. But it's not a feminine aspect that I'm seeking in men for example. Even though my current partner is like, you know, he's not the alpha male at all, it's not, but he's got the stereotype around, you know tall man (...) you're thinking in terms of like, somebody to create another human being. It's as if there's a little programming deep down somewhere that's kind of like OK, What do I want to create another human being? What am I looking for? What am I searching for? It's as if that's how you project in the male partner.

On the one hand, similar to Sophie's exploration of an intrinsic element in women for procreation, but while she relates it to her own reasoning for her attraction to men, Sandra in the excerpt below wonders about this in relation to her sexuality and her attraction to women at her age:

P9 Sandra:

I wondered about menopause and whether there's something in the hormonal drop that means that one could be more opened to women. I've wondered whether in the menopause because you lose the procreational imperative whether that affects then what you might look for in intimacy.

On the other hand, and showing contradictory accounts between same individuals yet an awareness of that, despite relating some characteristics to women, some of the same participants then spoke of how they seek these same characteristics in partners of both genders or regardless of gender <links 1,2,3>:

P2 Sara:

I mean that I want someone who will protect me, I think I have in a way connected masculinity with protection (...) I think it's a conception that I have, there's, I'm not sure though, I think women are more interested because of the affection and the emotion part, that they will show more interest. However there are people in both genders that are different, it's not strict (...) Despite the gender, it might sound silly but I'm looking for someone who's like my dad, even if it's a man or woman (...) I think in the way that he protects me, he is the only one, the only man who has been sweet in a way with me.



P6 Sophie:

I found both men and women, I'm usually attracted to fairly confident, strong people (...) It is something that, that I might still, even if I don't agree with it, I might have projected, like you know, have kind of done stereotyping male and female. And then slowly realized like, no actually (...) you know, to question my, what I was expecting or projecting and everything, and realize that, no actually you cant. And even, you know because being, and realizing that I was attracted more by people because of their personal qualities rather than their gender. Even though as I say, I'm back to what we were saying at the beginning, I'm still more 70/30.

P5 Christina:

I enjoy both, I hardly feel different, although there are different things I like, at root its quite similar, it's the warmth and the physical contact.

#### *5.4.1 Overview of Category 2*

The participants' accounts overall portray the differences and similarities in intimate emotional and sexual experiences in relation to the sexed biological body, the partner's gendered identity and individually distinguished emotions pertaining to the partner's personality. Research cited in chapter two<sup>18</sup> shows how traditional gender dynamics play a role in bisexuals' relationships (Weinberg et al., 1994; Pennington, 2009; Bhugra & Silva, 1998). However, this research's findings, as the extracts illustrate, showed no consistency regarding traditional gender roles except for an awareness of them. Most participants spoke of how the physicality of the body changes the physical experience, and how they enjoy different aspects of the sexed

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<sup>18</sup> Refer to chapter two pages 36-37

male and female bodies. The properties inherent in both subcategories incorporate views held by participants about their genders and partners of different genders, and the interrelations between the two. In addition, behaviours, sexual and non-sexual, such as gender performances, were described portraying how their behaviours and partners behaviours either changed or remained the same based on the partner's gender as well as the participants' understandings and own experiences of their gender roles.

While certain characteristics were perceived as feminine or masculine, participants were aware of the associations they made with traditional or stereotypical gender perceptions and roles, and overall it appeared that there was a search for particular characteristics in an individual regardless of gender. These findings again partially contradict other research studies that have shown that bisexuals' same-sex and opposite-sex relationships are predicated upon traditional gender stereotypes (Weinberg et al., 1994; Pennington 2009; Bhugra et al. 1998, Gustavson, 2009). On the other hand, some participants experienced the emotions differently due to difference in individuals not in gender and/or sexed body, while others emphasised the gender in relation to experiencing different emotions towards women. The diagram below represents this category.

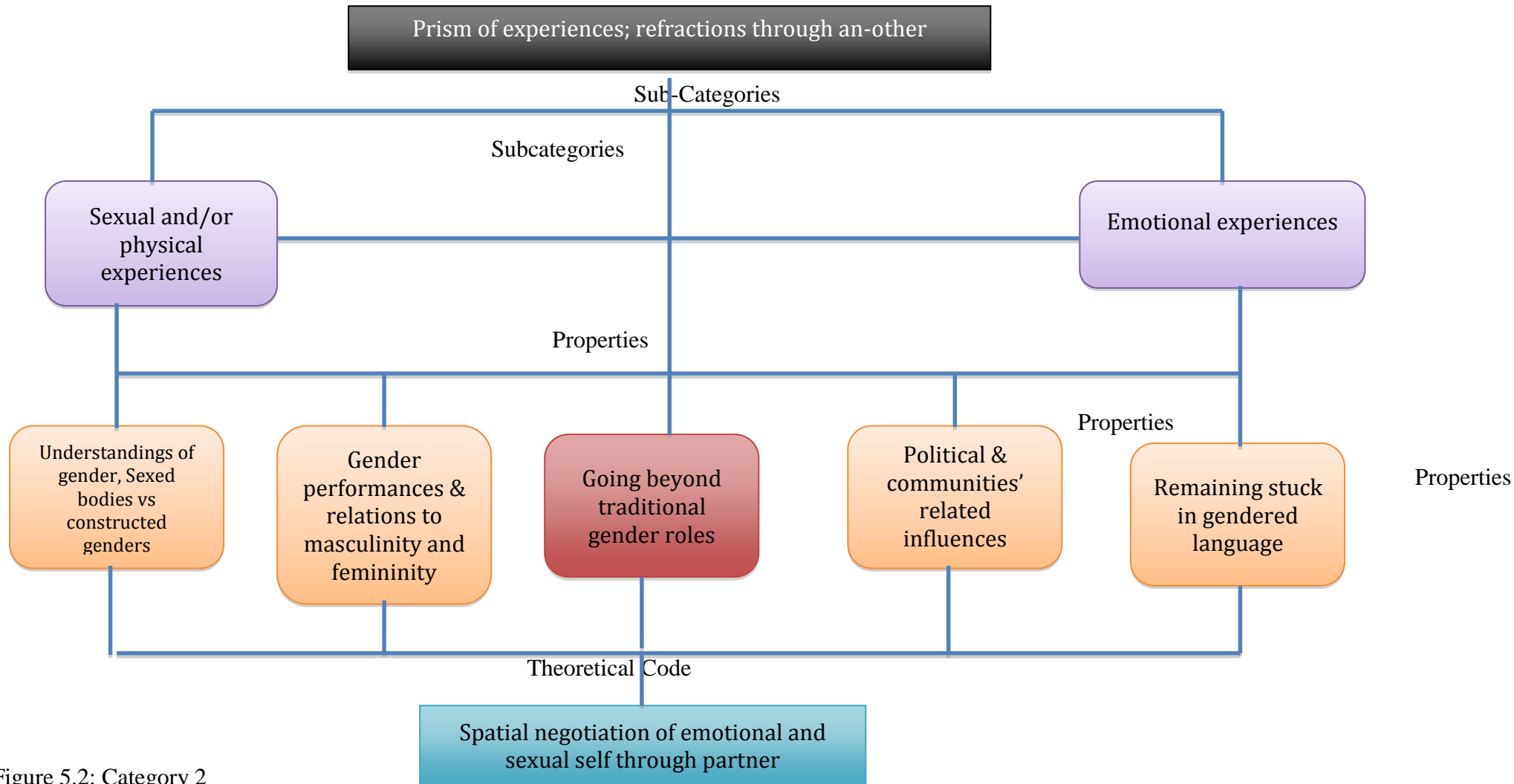


Figure 5.2: Category 2

### 5.5 Category three: Techniques of the relationship

This category incorporates the process of partner selection changing with time, exposure to communities, to people of varying sexualities and genders, and influencing current relationships. It is further underpinned by the intersections of the processes of spatial negotiation, which will be explained in the next chapter, pertaining to the three categories. Moreover, category three illustrates the consequences of these processes evident in the participants' accounts of their current relationships being built on greater and shared understanding and facilitating their emotional, sexual, and social experiences.

Some participants have specifically related their current preferences for bisexual partners or those who share similar views on sexuality, in relation and partially as a consequence of prior unsatisfactory experiences with lesbians and/or straight men:

P2 Sara:

No I didn't feel so comfortable and I don't know (...) I think it's something that I don't want but I prefer to keep it for me, it's like a part of myself that I don't reveal (*disclosing to men her attraction for both genders*) (...) but I think that also that the picture of two women of having sex is something that men have in their mind as a fantasy or something and I didn't want that (...) I think it gives them the power over me.

P3 Laura:

Oh it was horrible, that's the kind of "hot baggy", it means the ultimate men's fantasy about women (...) Yeah it was like well maybe we can have a threesome, you know, it wasn't understanding, just kind of the typical heterosexual male thinking of two women together, and explosions and that fantasy of what it is (...) It was a bit uncomfortable because it wasn't like, it was

like an object, but it didn't, there was no understanding, it was just, thankfully I wasn't in any of those relationships for long but it was almost, it's a hard one when I think of it, but yeah definitely uncomfortable. I wouldn't enter into a relationship with someone like that (...) I can't think of behaviours changing other than maybe not sharing as much, not sharing kind of thoughts and feelings open, as openly, I would probably maybe come to hide that because there was that kind of negative reaction (...) With heterosexual men its more about downing my attractions and not sharing that because of the reaction it was getting.

P4 Becky:

It was quite a long time ago and they were just normal, heterosexual relationships, I wouldn't have said to them I was just in the relationship with the person (...) I would definitely not disclose (...) There wouldn't be many straight men that I've seen actually (...) So once again, it's sort of like they're the people I seem to hang out with or seem to be interested in or form friendships with because that sort of stuff is not an issue for them (...) Yeah I don't know because for me the title, the terminology is just not, its weird, the whole philosophy behind it, its not about gender, that's what its about it, not what you call it, so for him (*ex-husband*) to be shocked by the word but not what there is, I just thought you don't understand me, how do you not know that about me because as I said there was nothing hidden.

While Sara and Laura's accounts seem similar on the one hand, Sara did not disclose her attraction to men and women because of the idea that this might arouse in them a fantasy about two women sexually, whereas Laura did encounter this reaction after disclosure which led her to refrain from having further relationships with straight men.

As for Becky, she recognises her overall tendency to surround herself with people who share similar views on sexuality and relationships. However, she used to refrain from disclosing based on her personal philosophy emphasising the person not the gender or sexuality, which accounts for her shock to her ex husband's reaction.

On the other hand, for Christina her current non-attraction to straight men is more related to her gender fluidity:

P5 Christina:

I think my attractions very much mediated from that way, like I have felt attractions towards men, and then had they identified as straight, it just dissipates (...) I think it's because, to an extent my gender is quite fluid, and I feel if I am with a straight man who is only attracted to women, that forces me to be woman, and I am not comfortable with that, I feel that it kind of erases a part of my identity. Also experiences being just with straight men, there are all sort of assumptions about how the relationship will look and how it would be, that feels really uncomfortable to me.

Whereas for Sandra, her strong political and feminist views shaped her own way of being with straight men in the past and she explains how this has changed now when she's in a relationship with a lesbian, also affecting her feelings, behaviours and attitudes:

P9 Sandra:

Well one of the most significant was with a man (...) But when we tried living together I couldn't bear any of the male female stereotyping stuff. He was reluctant to do domestic things (...) And I think it made me then sexually in bed feel everything had to be equal too. I would describe it as combative. That was my attitude (...) And because I perceived that there was a kind of put

down if I took on a more female role. (...) And with him I would never have let myself become sort of frivolous and girly in a way that I do find myself able to be with this woman. And I think its because I had no expectation that she would exploit that (...) It's been a very important part of my life to be part of the feminist movement. So politically in every way that drive to have equal relationships with men is absolutely essential (...) It's a huge change for me (*being with a woman and her experiences of herself*) and I think its to do with feeling safe, to explore that. (...) I could take for granted a level of understanding between us about the whole issue of respect.

All the participants' experiences reflect unpleasant emotions arising out of the non-understanding or negative reactions they have faced regarding their attraction to men and women. As Christina puts it, it felt like it "erases part of her identity". This erasure appears in all of the accounts, yet differs in how it is experienced primarily in relation to the individual's particular sexual and gender meanings and constructions. When talking about previous relationships with lesbian identified partners, Sara and Laura again shared a similar experience, as their attraction to both men and women was perceived as threatening by lesbian women:

P2 Sara:

(*Referring to disclosing to women*) Yeah because it's something common and most of them wanted other women (...) but still they would have in their minds that I would be able to leave them for a woman or a man (...)and they are being threatened by that (...)some of them had said that if you leave me for a man it's something that I cannot deal with (...) I think it's because of the sex thing (...) the sexual organ, I don't know why they say that.

P3 Laura:

I found that I had huge back clash with women who identified as lesbian, its almost like I had to come out before anything, and I had a lot of time when they were like: not interested (...) Because I was bisexual (...) Yeah they felt threatened and couldn't understand. (...) and now my friends are from the bisexual community or straight because you don't have to explain that (...) I am thinking of when it was like a lesbian, it was just like, I had to get that constant reassurance that they were fine (...)it (*relationship with lesbian*) was very brief (...) I think it was a contributing factor. I think it was because I was just expected to choose or I don't know if they just couldn't think that they didn't satisfy me physically and emotionally because I also have an attraction to something that they can't give me.

P8 Mary:

With women I worry that, lesbians don't want to be with a bisexual woman? (...) No I haven't had any experience. It's my, I don't know, from other people, what I've heard of other people's experiences (...) I've been out to a lesbian club sometimes and felt uncomfortable, like I was, I don't know, trying to, I felt that if I said I was bisexual then they wouldn't be interested, but then I felt like I was covering up.

Common amongst these participants is either their direct experience of negative reactions from lesbian women, or avoiding rejection based on knowing of others experiences. Moreover, for Sara disclosing her sexual attractions to women partners, in comparison to her non-disclosure with male partners, was due to the shared experiences. While Laura stopped disclosing to lesbian women and eventually stopped socialising with them due to her feelings of discomfort.



On the other hand, for Christina in the extract below, her views of lesbian women are different than other participants due to the shared experience of exploring gender roles with lesbian women, hence showing the relation to her gender identification and the emotional aspects involved. However, her preference for queer bisexual partners appears to still play a role in not having relationships with lesbians:

P5 Christina:

I don't have the same difficulty with lesbian women as assumption of gender roles because so many lesbian women have gone through the process of exploring their gender, and I'm just more likely to be aware of the issues around erasure and alternative gender identities, that feels safer to me than straight men (...) Yeah, because it is an emotional safety (...) I've had flings with lesbian women but I've never had a sustained relationship (...) I think it's more opportunity, but hypothetically I think my orientation preference for partners has been queer bisexual than lesbian.

On the other hand, for Becky, although she recognises some of the binegativity in the gay community, her philosophy of bisexuality as regardless of gender still overcomes, and she relates not having any relationships with lesbians simply due to lack of opportunity:

P4 Becky:

I might be, I don't know if this is the general feeling that the gay community look at bisexuality as a transition, phase or a confused state or train of wheels or whatever, you sort of think well, do they have this perception, but I'm in a relationship with this person not with the whole lesbian community's collective

thinking (...) I guess there's just not been the opportunity, it just hasn't arisen.

All the above excerpts reflect a broad sense of conflicting views between these participants and their previous experiences with lesbian and straight men. The consequences of some of these experiences and the impacts on the participants' feelings, seemed to have played a primary role in their current relationships being orientated towards bisexual partners:

P3 Laura:

Both of my partners are bisexual (...) Myself and my other partner are so very open and talk about all kind of things, you know we've got a very open relationship and communicate a lot.

P4 Becky:

If I compare my relationship now to a one that was 25 years ago, so I'm kind of a different person, and the situation was quite different (...) Well my current partner is bisexual so that's not an issue (...) I guess it does change the relationship with them (...) Yeah because you're thinking well you're not, well they understand how it is to have male partner and female partner, so you're not dealing with their own personal beliefs which are conflicting with yours because they get it, so you don't have to explain yourself (...) sort of acceptance yeah.

P5 Christina:

I think my preference in partners would be who self-identify as queer because to me that represents more of an understanding about fluidity and non-binary attitudes towards gender and sexuality (...) Like my previous partners were bi and my recent partners have been queer so a lot of that would be the evolution of my own sexuality and identities as well, and just the aging

process (...) It's a comfort thing, it's much easier for me to be with somebody who has some shared understanding of how your sexuality and gender and so on (...) I think it's quite important to me, especially that there are aspects in my life that are not visible, so it's very important for me that a partner understands that aspect (...) Yeah they're more receptive towards that.

The preference for being with a bisexual partner rather than a heterosexually or non-heterosexually identified other was very dominant across all participants' accounts. Moreover, the influences of growing older and developing one's self sexually and emotionally was also a very significant aspect in facilitating their experiences in their current relationships. As the above three extracts illustrate, personal beliefs, shared understanding and openness are perceived as essential for the relationships and the participants feelings in these relationships. Sophie's account highlights some of these aspects further and emphasises the emotional safety in being involved with bisexual others:

P6 Sophie:

If there's rejection it's actually an understood rejection and there's not going to be a stigma like you know, you, that they found a woman attractive and make my intention clear, if I'm surrounded by people who are actually already aware they're just going to say "Oh wow, thank you, no I really appreciate that but no I'm not interested" whereas you might have you know, maybe there's an also an underlying moment of fear where you don't want to be rejected by somebody who might also judge you.

In accord with theoretical sampling, participant 7, Jay, who identified his gender as male with female aspects, and his sexuality as bisexual, was interviewed at that point to seek data specific to how relationships are constructed. Jay is partnered with Laura

participant 3, who is also in a relationship with Becky participant 4. Jay and Becky are friends but not in a relationship. In interviewing Jay about his relationship with Laura, the aim was to saturate aspects of category three in relation to techniques of the relationship. Jay's views confirmed and supplemented those of Becky's regarding the shared and mutual understandings they both hold on how they negotiate themselves in their relationships:

P7 Jay:

I think that's been more common with straight women, it tends to be shorter periods of time than with bisexual women (...) personally I find relationships with bisexual women less challenging because they understand my bisexuality more easily and it's easier to, for example, walk down the road with Laura and say "Hey, that guy's cute" or "Hey that girl's cute". And because we're both non-monogamous and both bisexual it's an easy conversation, it's not, nobody feels threatened by it, it's just an observation, and it's fun.

P6 Sophie:

I consider myself lucky that I have a partner with who I can say, from saying "Ooh! Did you see that guy or did you see that woman?" It's really cool, really sexy, really "Ooh wow. Mm, wow. I would, would you? Would you?" And you're kind of joking and it's not a joke which is kind of like, we have this appreciation of the person for whatever, their physique, their brain, their sense of humour, there're all kinds of possibility in being able to actually make the comment and both being able to appreciate about it, at least, it's like because it's already, we both, it's like you don't have to try to explain to that, to that person, you don't have to try to see if it's possible with that person, you skip that whole explanation, clarification.

Jay's and Sophie's accounts reflect the importance of being able to share their emotional and sexual attractions towards people of both genders with their partners. Moreover, the role of friends and communities was also a major component in how these participants experienced their relationships and the consequences these had on them. For instance, some emphasised how the changes in their environments, from primarily heterosexual to becoming more involved with non-heterosexual communities, and specifically bisexual communities, has further contributed to their current preferences for bisexual partners and different ways of being in relationships:

P5 Christina:

In terms of community, I mean I love being here at BiCon, because I find a community of people who kind of get it who have no particular expectations of gender identity or gender performance or who I will or won't be interested in sexually and I find that really comforting. Recognising what is of you in other people that you don't necessarily see in the other community.

P6 Sophie:

I found myself, like my current partner is bisexual and the one before as well, and the women mostly bi as well (...) I think it's from my personal experience, I think it's also a question of the way your network of friends and relationship evolves (...) the people you meet are more likely to be a bit more open-minded (...) being in a more heterosexual or heteronormative group of friends, to then going from, because I'm part of the kinky community as well, so suddenly you're opening up and then being honest about it and then that means sometimes you lose certain of your friends.

P7 Jay:

I think one part I just realized is that almost all my friends were bisexuals (...) Males and females, but quite a lot of male bisexuals actually. So I must have been unconsciously surrounding myself with them. And then from there they told me about BiCon (...) The community at BiCon felt so much like home that I wanted to use the same term that everybody else in the community did. So I wanted to be part of this community (...) It gave me a sense of identity that made sense to me.

P8 Mary:

I think probably because, I was spending time in those groups, bi groups, so a lot of people I was socializing with were bi and I felt like they'd be more open to the idea of poly (...) I feel like its, easier for them to understand how I feel, if they're also bi.

The main consequences of becoming involved in bisexual communities and people, revolves around feelings of comfort and belonging. In addition, for participants who are polyamorous and/or part of other communities such as the kinky community and queer community, it further appeared that for them the bisexual community was a place where more openness towards these less common and non-heteronormative practices is found. Sandra, in the extract below reports a very different experience with the community:

P9 Sandra:

After I have started this relationship, I wanted to get more into a lesbian and bisexual circle, so I joined a social group (...) And although they were saying it was opened to lesbians and bisexuals, actually if I mentioned my daughter, anything to do with men, and I wasn't the only one, there were one or two other women about my age who'd been married and have children. I

just started to notice that when they mentioned their families the conversation would stop and then go off somewhere else (...) And I felt excluded and slightly put down (...) And that's also mirrored in having met some of my girlfriend's friends, the ex-girlfriends of hers who are proper lesbians are very sniffy with me.

On the one hand Sandra's experience is different from other participants, yet, it resonates with some of the previous accounts about negative reactions experienced in relation to the individual's bisexual attractions. Also, her feelings of exclusion further show the impacts of these experiences as other participants have also described. Sophie, in the extract above, mentions how the change from heterosexual to a bisexual environment also meant that she lost some friends, while for others this was a question of disclosing their sexuality and differed amongst some:

P4 Becky:

And with friends I think, I really don't know that this wouldn't change our friendship and I think why do I need to disclose that to them, because they know me, it doesn't change me, but they might have that perception.

P9 Sandra:

*(Referring to disclosing)* Slight awkwardness amongst some of my woman friends (...) Straight women (...) I think they also thought, oh she's become a lesbian. Well I know they did, almost all of them. Rather than she's bisexual. They made an assumption that I somehow come out or that this was there all along or something.

### 5.5.1 Overview of Category three

All the participants who identify as bisexual, including Sophie, participant 6 who identifies as 70% heterosexual and 30% bisexual, have moved from having

relationships with straight men and lesbian women, to primarily bisexual men and bisexual women. Participants 1 and 2 who chose not to use any sexual identity labels, have also moved from having relationships with straight men and lesbian women to currently women who do not identify their sexualities. The only exception was Sandra who is currently in her first relationship with a self-identified lesbian woman. Based on all accounts, there appears to be tendencies for the participants to overtime have relationships mainly with other bisexual individuals of the same and different gender or regardless of gender, or others who share similar views albeit using different terms of identifying their sexuality.

Within this process are the aspects discussed previously such as exposure and meeting individuals of multiple genders and sexualities, and exploring feelings and relationships. In addition, and part of the process of meeting others and exploring relationships with lesbians and straight men, the binegativity experienced has further played a role in the current partner preferences. Several studies show that bisexuals face stigmatisation and marginalisation by lesbians and heterosexuals (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; Kuyper & Fokkema, 2011). In addition, the experience of invisibility in society, which some participants referred to has also been documented (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Hequembourg & Brailier, 2009). These experiences appear to have all condensed into the how the participants' current relationships are constructed and negotiated. Again within the spatial negotiation there is a reflexivity process showing how experiences with different individuals have been thought of in relation to the partners' preferences they currently hold. Similar to categories 1 and 2, a diagram below is presented for category three.





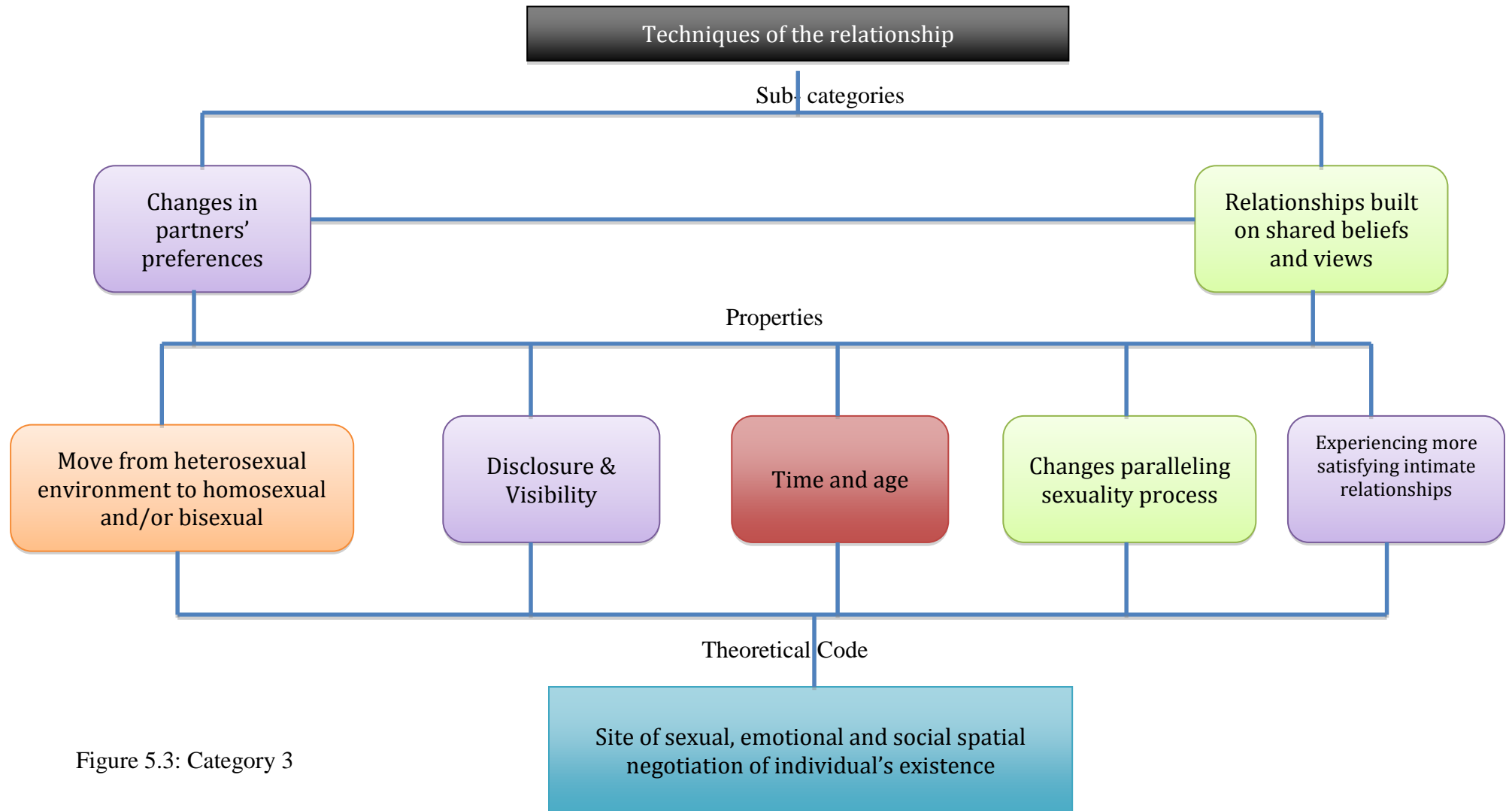


Figure 5.3: Category 3

## 5.6 Towards a Constructivist Grounded Theory

The interview questions were produced and constantly readjusted for the purposes of theoretical saturation throughout the analysis process in order to answer the research question: how do women construct meaning of their bisexual experiences in the context of their relationships. The generated data from the interviews resulted in the emergence of the three major categories, which have been discussed in detail based on the extensive use of extracts from the interviews. In addition, through continuously comparing data, showing similarities and differences, and the several intersections and links across all three categories, this aimed at theoretical integration resulting in the emergence of the final grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Charmaz & Byrant, 2007).

### 5.6.1 Theoretical Integration

The three primary categories represent the dominant themes that appear to be present and intertwined in all the participant's narratives. These three categories each have their properties and sub-categories that elucidate the processes. The theoretical concepts emerging from each category provide a new perspective of looking into the themes as a whole. And finally the emerging grounded theory reflects the overall interrelations and intersections between all the categories, subcategories, and properties and formulates them theoretically.

The overarching behavioural process identified is the participants' move from having relationships with heterosexually identified others, to non-heterosexually identified individuals. This process of partner selection has seemed to occur in parallel with the process of moving from heterosexual identifications to non-

heterosexual ones. Table 5.1 shows this primary pattern as well as variations in relation to the final grounded theory.

<b>Patterns and variations (Total: 9 Participants)</b>	Self-identified Bisexuals: total 5	Other sexuality identifications: total 2	No sexual identification: total 2
Moving from heterosexual to non-heterosexual relationships	5/5	2/2	2/2
Moving from relationships with lesbians, straight women & straight men to bisexual partners or partners sharing same views	5/5	1/2	2/2
Changing from heterosexual to non-heterosexual identification	5/5	2/2	2/2
Changing from heterosexual to bisexual identification	5/5	0/2	0/2
Differentiating sexual and emotional experiences based on sexed body, socialised gender, & partner's individual personality characteristics	5/5	2/2	2/2
Interrelations between gender & sexuality identifications and experiences with partners	5/5	2/2	2/2

Table 5.1: Main patterns and variations

The grouping of the participants above according to sexual identification is not in relation to categorisation, on the contrary it is to illustrate the minimal significance of the chosen sexual identity upon patterns, but rather how the common factor amongst all participants is having been in intimate relationships with people of

multiple genders, and that is the primary indicator here for the patterns. This further illustrates dissolution amongst the boundaries of labels, and as the analysis has shown, it is the meanings that the participants assign to their sexuality which impact other areas in their lives.

While the conditions, reasons and influences involved in these two parallel processes intersected on many levels, and formed aspects of category 2 as well, these were insufficient in explaining this parallel-ness. Hence, by further examining the relationships, intersections and interactions of the three categories, the identification of the basic social process underpinning most of the participants behaviours, feelings and actions was achieved (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) which I termed a “spatial negotiation”. The rationale and meaning behind spatial negotiation will be discussed in the next chapter. The figure below illustrates the intersection between the three categories based on the aspect of spatial negotiation.

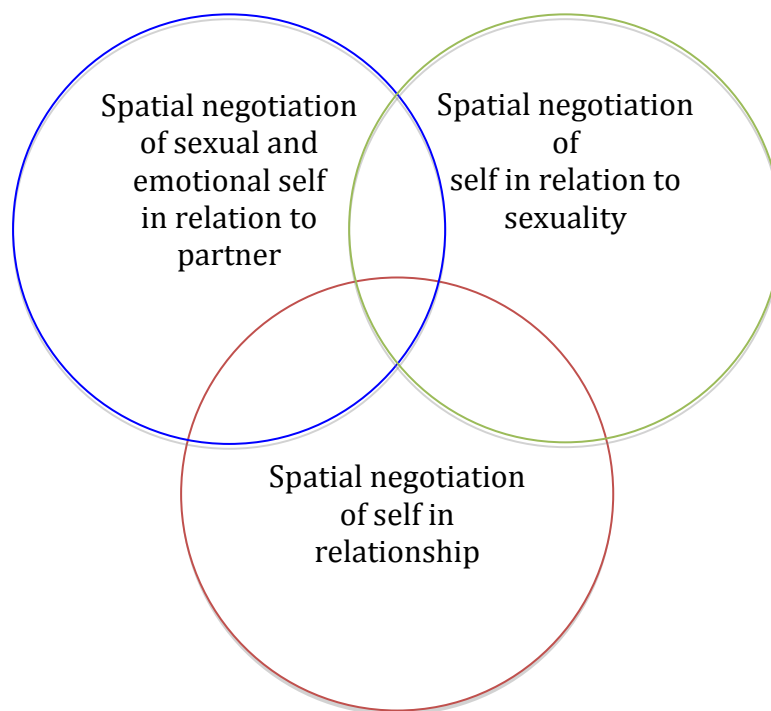


Figure 5.4: Categories main intersection

### 5.6.2 *Introducing the Constructivist Grounded Theory*

Women's bisexual experiences in contemporary relationships constructed within a sphere of spatial negotiations geared towards achieving their desired sexual, emotional and social existence with bisexual partners emerged as the final constructivist grounded theory, and is represented in figure 5.5 below. The identified process of spatial negotiation in all categories forms the backbone upon which the three categories conjoined in constructing the final grounded theory. The spatial negotiation was further broken down into four dimensions that incorporate all the properties involved in the constructions of relationships. These dimensions are: self-with-self negotiation, self-with-society negotiation, self-with partner negotiation, and self-with-relationship negotiation. Due to the participants' negotiation of self in different contexts, which appeared necessary and inevitable based on their bisexual attractions being non-heteronormative, this led to constructing relationships based on certain techniques that enabled a continuation of self while providing a new site for the constant constructions of their sexual, social and emotional existences. Spatial negotiation of sexual self, prism of experiences, and techniques of the relationship interact forming the contextual conditions that lead to the construction of relationships. The next chapter discusses in depth the final grounded theory while alluding to the primary literature that was consulted and used as a sensitising tool in the analysis, a source for the emergence of the theoretical codes, and the final constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2007; Birks & Mills, 2011).

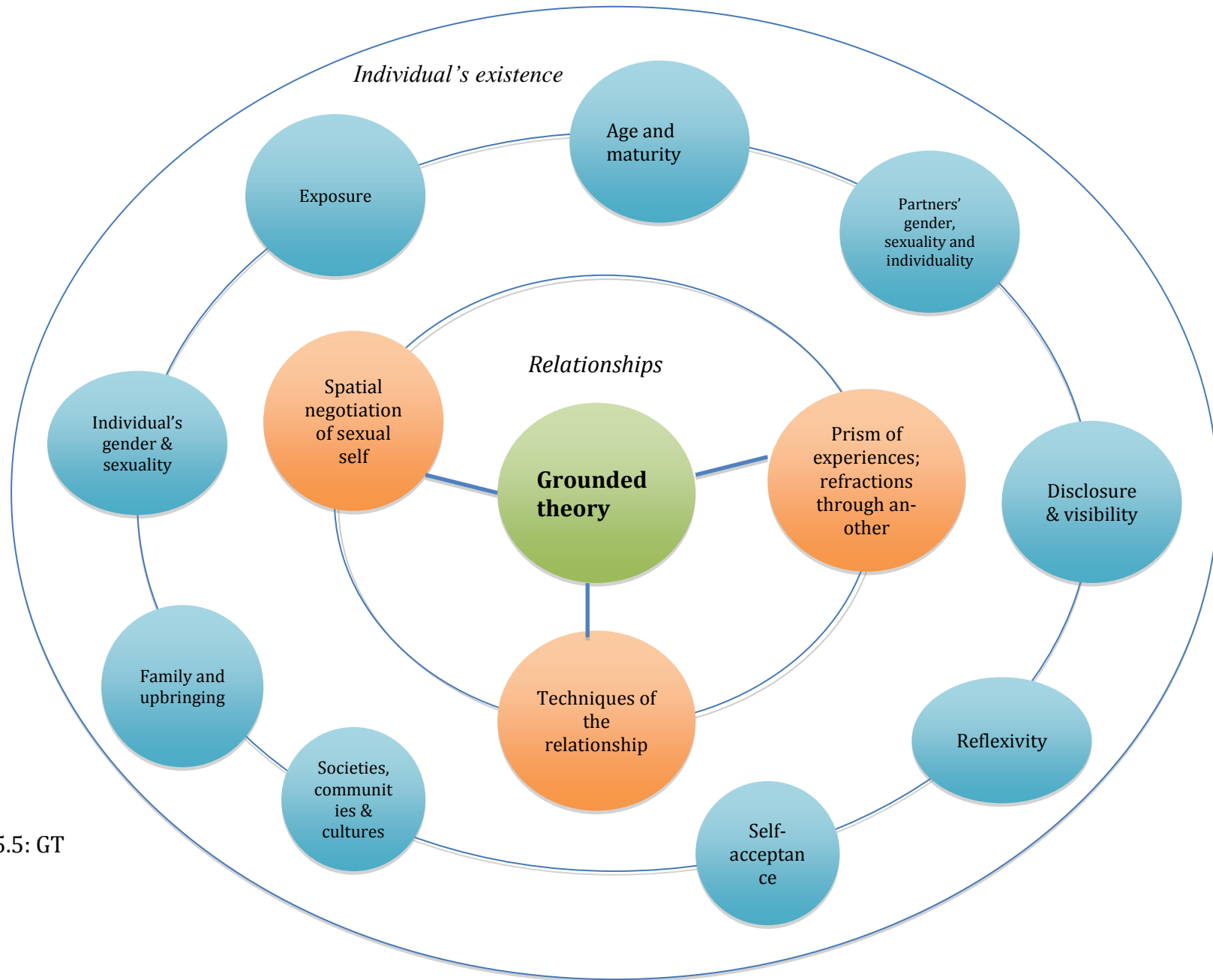


Figure 5.5: GT

## Chapter VI: Discussion and Reflections

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated the analytic process, which resulted in the emergence of the final grounded theory: women's bisexual experiences in contemporary relationships constructed within a sphere of spatial negotiations geared towards achieving their desired sexual, emotional and social existence with bisexual partners. Each of the three main categories, in aim of enhancing understanding of the main actions, behaviours and feelings that are incorporated within it, was divided into sub-categories as the diagrams demonstrate in chapter five. The subcategories contained properties that describe the aspects involved in the construction of meanings, and finally a theoretical code emerged from each category linking it to the other categories.

In category one, spatial negotiation of sexual self, two subcategories were identified accounting for how the participants have discovered and explored their bisexual attractions through questioning heterosexuality and learning and understanding about other sexualities, which resulted in either rejecting the use of a sexual identity or embracing one. This incorporated properties involving their age and how they experienced maturing and self-acceptance in relation to their families, cultures, and previous as well as current intimate and sexual relationships. These properties further influenced how they understood, defined and lived their sexualities. In moving the category into a theoretical direction through identifying the relationships between its subcategories and properties, and linking it to categories two and three, a theoretical code was pinpointed as: a process of spatial negotiation of self in relation to sexuality based on continuous reflexivity.



Category two, prism of experiences; refractions through an-other, was similarly divided into two sub-categories reflecting how the participants made sense of their sexual, physical and emotional experiences in relationships. Several properties were identified underlying this process such as how the participants understood their genders as well as their partners' genders in relation to bodies, constructions of gender and gender roles, as well as dominant notions of femininity and masculinity in an overall heteronormative society. This pointed to a parallel process occurring between categories one and two, which shows the move from heterosexual to non-heterosexual identifications based on negotiations of sexual self occurs in relation to the emotional and sexual experiences that were further negotiated through partners. By identifying the social process underpinning category two, the theoretical code 'spatial negotiation of emotional and sexual self through partner' emerged linking category two with the other categories.

Category three, techniques of the relationship, incorporated two sub-categories and several properties involved in the process of partners' preferences changing over the individual's life with current preferences being for bisexual partners. This process led to current relationships being built on shared values, included a move from being primarily involved in a heterosexual environment to homosexual and or/bisexual environment, and further resulted in more visibility and experiences of satisfying relationships. Hence, the theoretical code 'relationships being the site of sexual, emotional and social spatial negotiations of women's existence' emerged linking all categories.

Linking the three main categories and forming their foundation was the social process of spatial negotiation. The process of spatial negotiation reflects how the participants have been continuously constructing meanings of their bisexual

experiences leading to their current relationships being the contemporary site for these negotiations. Spatial negotiation can be divided into four dimensions: 1. self-with-self negotiation, 2. self-with-society negotiation, 3. self-with-partner negotiation, 4. self-with-relationship negotiation. These dimensions incorporate properties from all categories illustrating how the participants are constructing their current relationships with their partners of preference based on the interrelations between how they experience their sexualities, how they experience their partners emotionally, physically and sexually, and how these are negotiated in their current relationships allowing them to achieve greater satisfaction.

This chapter follows through by discussing the grounded theory in depth, and in light of the literature that was consulted in constructing it. Once categories began to develop, the literature was used to compare them with existing theories and concepts (Charmaz, 1990). The three main categories are presented in more detail and in light of the primary links between them, while illustrating the theory's framing within the symbolic interactionism perspective.

## **6.2 The Findings**

### *6.2.1 Spatial negotiation of sexual self*

The participants accounts illustrate overall how they came to identify, or not, their sexualities based on a multiplicity of factors and conditions, such as age, maturity, self-acceptance, society, family, friends, partners and relationships. Moreover, the accounts show the participants' reflexivity throughout this process. Considering the current sexual identifications of these individuals appearing to be constructed within the multiplicity of conditions discussed, and the reflexivity involved in reaching this self-agreement of using a term to define their sexuality, a

process of negotiation can be inferred. This negotiation of sexual self in relation to all the conditions and properties can be divided into two main interrelated dimensions: self-with-self negotiation (includes age, maturity, self-acceptance...) and self-with-society negotiation (includes families, friends, communities...). The only element common to all these participants is their move from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity, underpinned by their current inner self-agreement on their chosen term, or none. On the other hand, this move, and the end choice of term to define their sexual identities, diverges significantly among accounts. This divergence is non-linear and consequently cannot be perceived in relation to stages in time.

Although some researchers have used the non-linearity of bisexual identity narratives to argue the transitory and immature nature of a bisexual identity in the wider discourses on sexuality (Rust, 1996; Fox 1996), the findings from this study were framed spatially arguing that an individual's existence is inherently within space and time. Accordingly, the term 'spatial', derived from space and time theory in physics, was borrowed and reframed for this context as means of explicating the type of negotiation. Later the term 'spatial negotiation' was further developed and used to describe the common process of negotiation in all categories forming an integral part of the final grounded theory, and is discussed in following sections.

#### *6.2.1.1 Concept of spatial negotiation*

In physics, space and time form the ground of reality, in which every individual's whole existence takes place simultaneously in an area of space and at an interval of time (Greene, 2004). Time usually is considered as one dimensional and space as three-dimensional, whereby in relativist physics the time dimension cannot be separated from the space dimensions due it's dependence on it (ibid). Using this

concept enabled a new perspective of constructing the participants' experiences. The properties, which participants recounted as part of their sexuality construction, emotional and sexual experiences, and partner's preferences, are shared and common to all participants, yet the times at which they have occurred and/or the extent to which they have impacted the constructions varies significantly amongst accounts. Hence, in arriving at the currently negotiated sexual, emotional, and social self, they have negotiated with a multitude of properties residing within four primary dimensions, the first one, self-with-self negotiation, constitutes the time dimension as they have recounted their stories at a certain time within the other space dimensions, and the other three as space dimensions: 2.self-with-society (exposure, friends, communities, family) 3.self-with-partner (gender, sexuality, individual aspects) 4.self-with-relationship (all the previous 3 dimensions intersect and manifest). The grounded theory, as figure 5.5 in chapter five<sup>19</sup> illustrated, combines all four dimensions of spatial negotiation into one manifold. In approaching a view of sexual self from a spatial negotiation perspective rather than a linear perspective, the aim is to maintain the differences amongst individual experiences while developing a framework that can account for those differences. Moreover, the nuances in bisexual identifications can be incorporated within this view, however without resting the primary emphasis on a sexual identity per se, but rather a sexual self. This leads into the rationale behind choosing the word 'self' rather than identify in relation to the sexual, and eventually the emotional and social aspects.

The choice behind using the term self instead of identity is due to the participants varied experiences of their sexualities, and their relations to their bisexual experiences as not always contributing to a bisexual or sexual identity. Hence, this

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<sup>19</sup> page 141

accounts for those who chose bisexuality as a sexual identity and those who didn't, yet their relationships with men and women and their experiences have constructed parts of their self that have been deemed sexual and emotional. In addition, this framing falls within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and a social constructionist epistemology. In symbolic interactionism the idea of self lies in its non-singularity, but rather in its social construction based on a process of interpersonal interactions through meanings found in symbols and language (Bilton et. al., 1996; Giddens, 2006). This further links category one to category two, and accounts for the interrelations and/or interdependency between experiences of the partner sexually and emotionally and understandings of sexuality and gender. The next section on category two develops this idea.

### *6.2.2 Prism of experiences; refractions through an-other*

Category two represents the multiplicity of emotional and sexual experiences of the participants with previous and current partners. Metaphorically, and as means of theoretically formulating the experiences, the partner stands in for the prism that breaks up the participants' experiences into their constituent properties, hence the use of the term 'refractions through an-other'. On the other hand, the participants' are looking through the prism from within their own positioning, which appears to incorporate essentialist and constructionist paradigms of gender/sex, and further positioned within the personal meanings pertaining to their sexualities and identifications. The symbolic interactionist Herbert Mead (1912/2002) argued that through continuous interactions with others the sense of self is created. In this case, and based on the participants' accounts, their emotional and sexual experiences are constantly constructed based on negotiations made through the understandings within

themselves and with partners. In what appeared to be at times conflicting accounts amongst the same interviews and between different interviews, there seemed to be a process of trying to make sense of one's sexual and emotional experiences reflecting how essentialist views of gender are mediated with the social constructions of gender. This could account for the resulting conflicting views arising in the participants' attempts to explain experiences within the existing and dichotomous notions on femininity and masculinity and/or male and female.

Judith Butler (2006) argues against the separation between sex as the biological body, gender as the cultural framing of the biological body, and sexuality based on a desire for a sex object choice. Drawing on Butler's ideas of an intelligible gender being one which maintains coherence amongst gender, sex and sexuality or sexual practice (ibid), while framing this within the symbolic interactionism perspective, provides a clearer picture for understanding the participant accounts. Hence, this perspective can account for the multiplicity of experiences that were recounted in relation to genders as sexed bodies and socialised genders while also maintaining the influence of every individual's understanding of their sexuality on the interplay between these three factors.

On the other hand, there was a glaring divide between experiences of the real body versus the constructed/socialised gender. In this case, I agree with the Diamond (2008) who argues that pure social constructionism fails to account for the real body experiences that interact with the sociocultural factors in producing varied erotic experiences. Therefore, to ensure the consideration of these experiences in the generation of the grounded theory, they were perceived as one of the range of the participants' sexual and emotional experiences. In addition, drawing on Butler's theory of gender assists in incorporating this dimension of experience into the theory.

Overall the participants' accounts reflect how they make sense of their emotional and sexual experiences in relation to their partners, whether it is by differentiating physical sexed bodies from genders, or using gendered language despite trying to escape gender binaries, or describing behaviours in relation to traditional gender roles even if those gender roles are not maintained in relating with the partner. Moreover, some emphasized the physical experiences based on the sexed body and not the gender, while others related these physical experiences to the impacts on their emotions, and some stressed seeking particular characteristics from partners. Even within those who sought particular characteristics there were differences based on either finding these characteristics in one gender more than the other, based on a gender understanding stemming from stereotypical and traditional notions of gender.

An awareness of how gender understandings and experiences were interrelated was evident in all accounts showing a level of reflexivity being part of the continuous self-negotiation. Hence, category two further introduces a new dimension of spatial negotiation between emotional and sexual self in relation to the partner(s), while it incorporates aspects of category one concerning the dimensions of self-with-self negotiation and self-with-society negotiation that have led to the construction of the sexual self. The self-with-society negotiation here accounts primarily for the ways sexual and emotional experiences are framed within gender paradigms based on constructions of heteronormativity in society. Hence, this links properties of society in its constructions of gender and views of masculinity and femininity with the use of language as a primary tool of portraying meanings. The discrepancy in the accounts can be understood as a constituent of the spatial dimension of sexual and emotional self in relation to gendered views, thus, showing that individuals' sexualities do not directly relate to understandings of gender, neither does the gender of the partner

necessarily determine the participants' sexual and emotional experiences, with the exception of the physical contact experiences of the real bodies. This finding partially complements existing bisexuality theory in discussing sexual subjectivity, whereby the subjectivity is not purely determined by the gender of the object choice (Hemmings, 2002). Rather it appears that the ways individuals construct and experience their sexuality is based on the spatial negotiation that has consequences on the ways they further construct and negotiate their genders within themselves and consequently with their partners. Based on this view, the theoretical code 'negotiating sexual and emotional self through partner' links the properties and subcategories of category two to categories one and three.

#### *6.2.2.1 Furthering the concept of spatial negotiation*

In furthering the concept of spatial negotiation to account for underlying processes in the other categories as well, some ideas from Hemmings (2002) were further consulted. In her book, 'Bisexual Spaces: a geography of sexuality and gender' Hemmings develops a critical theory on bisexuality by drawing on methodologies of cultural geography and spatial theory in sociology. She argues the significance of a spatial approach for understanding sexuality and gender. In using spatial theory this allows for an exploration of differences between bisexuals and focuses more on generation of meanings rather than identity (Hemmings, 2002). I mainly drew on the idea of how thinking spatially can account for bisexual differences and the constructions of meanings. On the other hand, I significantly diverged from Hemmings whose focus is on gendered and sexual spaces that are informed by bisexual knowledge in their development (2002). Whereas in refining the grounded theory my emphasis is on the relationship as the space for the negotiation of sexual,



emotional and social self. This signifies one of the hallmarks of grounded theory in allowing the theory to emerge from the data rather than fitting the data into existing theories (Charmaz, 2006; Birks & Mills, 2011).

### *6.2.3 Techniques of the relationship*

Category three develops from the previous two categories while introducing the relationship as the context of interest in this study, whereby participants' actions, behaviours and feelings manifest at a given point. Therefore, the spatial negotiation in the relationship partakes of the previous negotiations of self-with-self, self-with-society, and self-with-partner, forming what I termed 'techniques of the relationship'. These techniques, which will be discussed in detail shortly, appear to facilitate all the dimensions of negotiations, and explain the process of seeking partners with shared views, a primary factor upon which these relationships have been constructed.

In comparison to the reflexive questioning evident in category one in negotiating a sexual self, most participants acknowledged not having questioned their genders although were aware of how their gender identifications were largely contingent upon their birth gender and the ways in which they were socialised throughout their lives into this gender. In addition, the participants reflected on the constructions of the stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity and/or male and female in relation to their views of their genders and partners' genders. They also showed an awareness of the stereotypical ways in which gender is performed based on what a man and what a woman should be and should do. This forms the primary point of intersection between category two and three, whereby the negotiation of sexual and emotional self in relation to the partner results in some of the eventual preferences for partners. The sexual and emotional experiences of previous and

current partners construct part of the conditions in which the process of partner selection takes place. Again, this forms the primary similarity amongst all participants, yet each individual has their own unique process as the extracts in chapter five<sup>20</sup> illustrated.

In addition, meeting people of multiple genders and sexualities, part of the sexual negotiation, further accounts for these preferences, hence linking category one with three. The category further illuminates how sexual and emotional experiences contributed to negotiations of sexual self and vice versa. Therefore, 'techniques of the relationship' forms the conceptual link between categories one and two, while further adding a new dimension specific to relationships. The intersection of all negotiations in the relationship forms a new spatial dimension of negotiation (self-with-relationship), which in its own right accounts for some of the techniques of the relationship and results in the final grounded theory.

In constructing the grounded theory and the idea of techniques of the relationship, I drew on some ideas from Foucault (1978), which are in line with symbolic interactionism and intersect with the social constructivist perspective adopted throughout. Foucault developed an idea of techniques or technologies of the self, based on the principle that a 'subject' is not a static or fixed entity, rather is produced through techniques that are continuously changing through history and cultures (Fraser, 1999). These techniques for Foucault are specific practices which individuals use in practicing their being and in transforming themselves, which he describes as processes of 'subjectivation'. Having identified from this research findings the several interrelated and interdependent properties and dimensions that form part of the individual's spatial sexual, emotional and social negotiations, and

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<sup>20</sup> Refer to pages 110-120

how these influence and construct the relationships, the term techniques was borrowed and applied to relationships rather than self. Beyond the surface level of being with someone who shares similar views and beliefs, which is the case with many partners regardless of sexuality, what appears to be primary here is how these understandings are the bedrock on which negotiations are formed.

The participants' reflexive stances pertaining to their construction of knowledge represents their knowledge of self, or what Foucault terms 'the problematisation factor'. The intersection between their experiences in relation to their current negotiated self in their relationships which occurs at all levels of spatial negotiation, forms a 'new' self at that point with another(s). Hence, how they practice and experience themselves in relationships is a result of the several techniques involved in their relationships such as disclosure, sharing views and beliefs, and sexual and emotional experiences. The construction of these techniques partakes of the spatial negotiations evident in the three categories, and is used by the individuals to continuously transform into a state they desire. In some cases as the extracts in the previous chapter<sup>21</sup> illustrate, the desired state is that of visibility of an authentic self in a relationship with another and the experiences of intimacy. The desired states also vary amongst individual participants and are based upon their historical and current situations, and relationships.

Moreover, the participants' narratives incorporate a multitude of aspects in relation to their current relationships' constructions in comparison to previous relationships. These comparisons shed light upon the continuous flux and change in how relationships are practiced by each person in a given relationship. The

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<sup>21</sup> Refer to pages 123-134

techniques of the relationships are then inconsistent over relationships and throughout the individuals' lives.

*6.2.4 Women's bisexual experiences in contemporary relationships constructed within a sphere of spatial negotiations geared towards achieving their desired sexual, emotional and social existence with bisexual partners*

By incorporating the main properties across the categories, the individual is then viewed as situated not only within a setting that is external to it, such as society and communities, but through the discourses made available to them and how these are spatially negotiated both externally and internally in their relationship formations. This includes how the individual is constructed and forms their constructions of self interdependently with another in an intimate and sexual relationship.

The self-reflexivity evident in the participants' experiences appears to be further enhanced in the contexts of their relationships as they have the opportunity to reflect through and with another(s). These participants who have chosen or not to identify as bisexual and to engage in relationships with partners of multiple genders have made a choice based on a variety of factors and against the face of binegativity and invisibility. Consequently they have constructed their intimate and sexual relationships as a new site in which they hold a responsibility towards themselves and their partners. Broken down, the word 'responsibility' is 'response-ability', hence their ability to respond to themselves and the world around them in a particular way. Responsibility here is very relative to the relation within one's own self to realise they have a dearth of ways to respond, and which way they choose, is inevitably their decision, despite influenced differently amongst individuals. It is a choice that they continuously make in relation to themselves and their partners, and in the contexts of

their relationships. This ability to assume responsibility is what perhaps empowers these women in the way they are changing their circumstances of being viewed as deviant or other, and assuming their positions within themselves through their relationships.

In theories on bisexuality as presented in chapter two<sup>22</sup>, bisexuality and bisexual individuals have primarily been understood through sexuality and gender theories which in themselves are closely tied to the politics of the corresponding communities. In this research, the primary emphasis is on the relationship; hence the involvement between two or more individuals is of primary concern. The data from the interviews shows how in being in an intimate and sexual relationship, the participants were in a second-hand relationship with their own as well as their partners' communities. However, the understandings and meanings derived from these multiple relationships with others vary making their intimate and sexual relationships a form of mini community in its own right, and in relation to the construction of meanings. Thus, they are constituted as individuals in and through these relationships and continuously forming themselves dependently on identifications with their partners.

The concept of spatial negotiation of a new self (socially, emotionally and sexually) with the interdependence on a relationship highlights the significance of the relationship as the site whereby the individual integrates various dimensions of their self through and with their partners. This indication develops from the data analysis while also drawing on the idea of kinship being the "site integrating the subject's sexual and social existence" (Merck, 2007, p.54). While in category one 'spatial negotiation of sexual self' and category two 'prism of experiences; refractions through an-other' there is more emphasis on upbringing and parental influences, this

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to pages 19-48

almost disappears in accounts in category three 'techniques of the relationship'. This made me wonder of how these individuals have now moved away from the families that they were born into and are now constructing their own new relationships. This move is paralleled with moving away from heteronormative family and kinship structures. Although the literature cited in chapter two<sup>23</sup> shows a difference between monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, in this study the techniques of the relationship identified, and the four dimensions of spatial negotiations were common across individuals who were in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships. These relationships appear to be moving into new kinship modes, for instance shown in category two of how genders are explored and constructed in attempts of distancing from stereotypical notions despite remaining stuck in language, and in category three through the conscious choices of partners.

Hence, the constructivist grounded theory that emerged, while using existing literature as means of refining it, reflects how the participants have constructed meanings of themselves in their relationships based on the four dimensions of spatial negotiation. These dimensions are in constant change with the natural movements in one's life and consequently influence the techniques of the relationship.

As the participants professed and I consequently explored, their experiences are shaped within the contexts of society's norms and deviations. Yet, through examining the process of partners' choices and preferences, this shed light on a new way of constructing a place, the relationship, which is created out of choice, shared meanings, values and beliefs. The construction of these relationships further provides affirmation and visibility. The most significant aspect is in comparison to the families and kinship models individuals are born into, they are now choosing and forming new

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<sup>23</sup> Refer to pages 39-41

ways of being in relationships that inevitably will become the new forms of kinship. This conscious and reflexive degree of choice and responsibility bears great significance on the empowerment of these relationships in the face of disempowerment created in the face of binegativity in the society.

This constructivist grounded theory provides an interpretative frame for understanding bisexual women's relationships through proposing abstract ways of understanding relationships between the theoretical concepts of the categories (Charmaz, 2006). The theory explicates how and why the participants construct their meanings and actions in certain ways and in relation to their specific situations (ibid). Moreover, the interpretative nature of the constructivist grounded theory provides priority to the patterns and connections that emerged from the data rather than claiming determinacy through linear reasoning (ibid).

### **6.3 Reflections on the research process and limitations**

Constructivist grounded theorists are urged to take a reflexive stance in conducting their research, which includes constant reflection on how meanings are generated and interpreted by both researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2006; Mruck & Mey, 2007). In chapter three<sup>24</sup> I have discussed in detail how my underlying assumptions about the world were considered in relation to the methodology and area of study. This is inline with adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach to the research whereby reflexivity formed an essential strategy in the research design (ibid). In this section I further reflect on how these assumptions were managed during data generation and analysis.

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<sup>24</sup> Refer to pages 50-68

Both symbolic interactionism and social constructionism believe that data generation is the result of interplay of knowledge between researcher and participants (Birks & Mills, 2011). Therefore, the interview is the context in the form of a social relationship in which the construction of knowledge occurs (Dexter, 2006). Both the researcher and the participants bring into the interview their personal identities and further construct those through the interview itself (Elliott, 2005). Several of the participants asked me prior to commencing the interview about the reasons behind choosing to research bisexual women's relationships. While I provided them with an honest yet brief answer<sup>25</sup> before interviewing, and explained the reason being to minimize the influence of my views on their answers, I explained that I would be happy to discuss more if they wanted after the interview. In approaching the participants this way, the aim was multifaceted. First, it provided a way of managing power differentials by approaching the researcher-participant relationship from a standpoint of reciprocity (Mills & Birks, 2011). Constructivist grounded theorists encourage researchers to adopt an open stance such as by sharing personal details and answering questions (Mills et. al., 2006; O'Connor, 2001). Moreover, discussing how the results of the research will be disseminated and asking participants if they would like to be sent an email of the findings once completed further makes the research mutually beneficial. This is closely related to the ethical principle of beneficence (Nagy, Mills, Waters, & Birks, 2010) and is also considered a guiding principle for research on bisexuality (Barker et. al., 2012).

Some of the implications of this approach were evident in the openness that participants appeared to have in the interviews. For instance, participant 1, Emily, when asked at the end how she found the interview, explained her initial hesitant

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<sup>25</sup> Refer to chapter 1 p.12



position and slight discomfort about discussing some personal issues with a stranger. However, she felt that throughout the interview the discomfort eased and she related this to my approach of interviewing. Other participants, particularly the ones interviewed at BiCon, explained at the end of the interviews that being interviewed by a researcher who is also taking part of BiCon felt comfortable to them and allowed them to share their experiences in depth. This awareness of context and how this may have shaped the construction of data is another guideline provided by bisexuality researchers to consider (Barker et. al., 2012).

On the other hand, considering that the majority of participants, six out of nine, were recruited and interviewed at BiCon, the data hence reflects a very specific group of individuals. Arguably, being at BiCon already entails certain awareness around bisexuality issues since the event provides attendees with workshops for several issues that may be of significance to their bisexuality and the ways in which to manage their relationships. This could also be a factor contributing the level of reflexivity in the accounts. However, I believe that this is one the strengths of the research whereby the participants' knowledge, and the co-construction of knowledge, lead to richness in the data from which the grounded theory emerged. Consequently, this is of significance as one of the research aims is to contribute to the field of Counselling Psychology in which little has been written on bisexuals' relationships.

The final theory makes no claims of generalisation or of portraying a single truth, but is merely a co-construction of the participants' experiences and my analysis. In addition, the sample size of nine is relatively small, although grounded theorists argue that the theoretical saturation and quality of the data in comparison to the sample size is of primary significance (Morse, 2007). Theoretical saturation is a primary tool of analysis in grounded theory, however, it is questionable whether this

research has achieved theoretical saturation since this remains a debatable issue even within grounded theorists (Dey, 2007).

Several of the research participants spoke about the lack of awareness growing up on LGBT and bisexuality particularly, in comparison to the more accessibility today. This is not to say that suddenly bisexuality has overcome all its invisibility and other related nuances, however, this reflects the social change occurring in this area of life. Mruck and Mey (2007) argue that in face of social change and globalisation, using existing and established theories to generate new hypotheses, such as the primary purpose of quantitative methods, is limiting in keeping up with these changes. On the other hand, and despite grounded theory being critiqued for its non-generalizability, it offers fresh insights based on the theory being drawn from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). The grounded theory is interpretivist in its nature and bridges the gap between realities and interpretations of reality. Hence, the statements produced are not universal but tentative generalisations (Byrant & Charmaz, 2007).

#### **6.4 Contributing knowledge and suggestions for future research**

Adopting a social constructivist grounded theory in understanding bisexual women's relationships reveals some issues that are of importance for counselling psychologists by offering a framework or guidelines for working with clients who have intimate and sexual relationships with others of multiple genders, and provides insight into areas that require further research in this field (Charmaz, 2006). The finished grounded theory explains bisexual women's relationships in new theoretical terms and demonstrates the dimensions and properties under which the techniques of the relationship emerge and change.

The data collection, generation and analysis were continuously guided not only by symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, but also by my aim as a counselling psychologist to produce a theory that may be of practical use for others in this field. Social constructionism has been critiqued for its insufficiency in explicating the multiplicity of levels of knowing in the counselling context (Hansen, 2004). Therefore, through emphasising the role of the individual in the sphere of negotiations and framing the theory within a symbolic interactionism perspective, which states that individuals, despite the interactions with their social context, still have an independent choice (Burr, 2003), I have attempted to maintain the importance of the person's individuality in these constructions.

Adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach was highly relevant and provided part of the rationale for why this methodology was chosen in relation to the anticipated knowledge contribution to counselling psychologists<sup>26</sup>. The epistemological intersection between postmodernism, which underlines counselling psychology, and a constructivist grounded theory lies in their relativist positions whereby reality is understood in its multiplicity and relativity to every specific individual (Bernstein, 1983, 1988).

Counselling psychology in its philosophical stance and positioned within a post-modern perspective, has attempted to integrate some of those issues such as sexuality, gender, and race into its sphere of knowledge to understand humans (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). Hence, as a counselling psychologist trainee, I began to conceptualise the emergence of my grounded theory from within this perspective. The final grounded theory in accounting for gender, sexuality, age, culture, family and societal influences, and the interplays taking part in the negotiation of the self in the

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<sup>26</sup> For reference refer to chapter 3 p.50-68

relationship, provides a new theoretical framework to understand bisexual women's relationships in practice by pointing out to the importance and significance of all these aspects in the negotiation of a self. Future research on bisexuals' relationships aiming to contribute to the field of counselling psychology may further explore aspects that this theory did not account for such as social status, religion and disability.

Moreover, the specificity of the type of identification in comparison to a simple grouping of these women under bisexual, and looking at the interrelations between what the chosen sexuality terms mean to every person, and in return the influences these have on other areas of their lives or vice versa, further provides an area of consideration when working with women who have emotional and sexual attractions towards multiple genders. In addition, this insight provides a suggestion for future research on bisexuals' relationships to refrain from a broad grouping and assumption that all bisexuals experience their sexuality and/or self in the same way.

One of the primary methods developed in counselling and psychotherapy for LGBT individuals is regarding coming out and the affirmative approach (Rust, 1996). This approach is underpinned by developmental models of sexual identity formation emphasising the importance of self-discovery in which the aim is to reach self-acceptance regarding same-sex attractions and psychological integration (Cass, 1990; Coleman, 1982; Minton & McDonald, 1983). More recently, Bradford (2006) in her article "Affirmative psychotherapy with bisexual women" presents an overview of significant aspects that therapists need to account for when working with bisexual women. She also highlights the diversity and differences between bisexual women's experiences and lesbian and heterosexual women. Nevertheless, Bradford's model continues to rest upon an assessment of the developmental stage of bisexual women's

identity. With the emphasis on developing a sexual identity as a positive therapeutic aim, this approach does not account for women who may choose not to identify their sexualities for several reasons. For instance, the participants in this study who do not choose to identify their sexualities have still expressed a self-acceptance about their attractions to both genders. Therefore, this reflects the need for an alternative approach and openness by therapists to acknowledge the several factors that may contribute to an individual's sexual-self negotiation and not necessarily a sexual identity. The grounded theory from this study could be seen as a new and potential way for therapist's to understand how bisexual women's negotiations of sexual self is interdependent upon other factors, while also accounting for the difference between gay and lesbian same-sex intimacies and intimacies of bisexuals.

Moreover, social constructionist therapy gained popularity in the field of practicing LGBT affirmative counselling and psychotherapy (Hodges, 2008). Through challenging assumptions about gender, sexuality and pathology, social constructionist therapy offers a more suitable approach for work with LBGT individuals (Simon & Whitfield, 2000). Its aim is to encourage a co-constructive and reflexive therapeutic relationship based on a deconstruction of both therapist and client assumptions (ibid). However, this approach has been criticised for remaining underpinned by notions of identity categories and the aim of affirming an LGBT identity as being a primary therapeutic goal (Hodges, 2008). In arguing this, Hodges (2008) proposes using queer theory in approaching LGBT identities whereby categories are thought of in their complexity and variety. Yet, bisexuality theorists have demonstrated the lack of queer theorising on bisexuality (Callis, 2012).

Bisexual invisibility has been associated with high rates of psychological problems (Barker & Langdrige, 2008). Yet, there appears to be limited literature

addressing these issues from the psychological therapies. Furthermore, and possibly accounting for the scarcity of literature on addressing psychological problems resulting from bisexual invisibility, research shows that bisexual invisibility infiltrates into the psychological therapies, and in comparison to lesbian and gay experiences of validation in therapy, bisexual clients report negative experiences (Page, 2004). Bisexual clients have further emphasised the value of the therapist taking a proactive role suggesting that more positive interventions are needed to counteract the impacts of invisibility and binegativity in society (ibid). Other studies show that bisexual clients experience greater degrees of heterosexual bias from their mental health providers than lesbian and gay clients (Moss, 1994). Considering the utter significance of the therapist's role in building a trusting and positive therapeutic relationship as the basis for an individual's personal empowerment, and in light of the discussed literature, therapists' knowledge about and attitudes towards bisexuality and bisexuals' relationships is of utmost importance.

Although on the one hand the literature on how to address psychological problems related to bisexual invisibility is scarce, on the other hand the majority of literature on bisexuals' relationships is in relation to bi-negativity and the impacts of that on their well-being. This indicates an unbalanced view on bisexuals and their relationships in the counselling context. Hence, the contribution this study provides to counselling psychologists and other therapy practitioners is multifaceted. First, by distancing the theory from the emphasis that current literature holds on bisexual relationships in relation to bi-negativity and impacts of that on their well-being<sup>27</sup>, the aim was to add a different dimension to the apparently generic yet singular perspective that prevails. The availability of one overarching perspective into

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<sup>27</sup> Refer to chapters 1 & 2 p. 9-48

bisexuals' relationships may in its turn bias counselling psychologists' approach. Therefore, a new perspective provides a theory that may be useful in conceptualising what aspects in the relationships of these individuals are of significance and accordingly need to be explored in therapy. The final grounded theory reflects a position where bisexuals' relationships can be on the one hand grouped together, despite not being the same, while maintaining the individual differences.

In addition, and despite the literature on the implications of bisexual specific stigmas on relationships<sup>28</sup>, the dearth of literature on how relationships may be a context of empowerment for individuals in face of binegativity and invisibility reflects the need for ways of empowering individuals through therapy, which this research begins to highlight. However, this remains dependent upon the individual practitioner in their ability to empower clients. In order to understand and help those who seek therapy, taking a look at those who currently don't is a good place to start. And rather than using data on relationships of heterosexuals and/or homosexuals to attempt to empower bisexuals, this research provides a starting point of using bisexual specific data for empowering bisexuals' relationships.

The research findings show the significance of the relationship in the participants' lives, and how through the four dimensions of spatial negotiation the techniques of the relationship allow women to reach their desired states of social, sexual and emotional existence. In contrast to the affirmative approaches to therapy that emphasise sexual identity, the emergent grounded theory places emphasis on the relationships of bisexuals and the role they play in facilitating the individual's achievement of a desired state that does not necessarily pertain to sexual identity.

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<sup>28</sup> Refer to chapters 1 & 2 p. 9-48

Hence, counselling psychologists could view this theory as one way of gaining insight into how clients with relationship problems may benefit from an approach to their relationships that emphasises and facilitates the four dimensions of negotiation. For instance, in establishing a therapeutic goal that focuses on achieving the client's desired state, which is particularly unique to each individual, an exploration of how the client is positioned within the four dimensions of negotiation in their life may assist the process. In addition, by creating a therapeutic space that enhances self-reflexivity geared towards allowing the client to make individual choices and assume responsibility, this can be a source of empowerment in their relationships. The therapist can play an absolutely important role in the facilitation of negotiations, and through using the concepts of this theory as loose guidelines, may further enhance their approach in working with bisexual women's relationship issues. However, like any other theory, the reflexive use of it is of utter importance. Thus, the theory should fit into the client's presenting issues, rather than forcing the theory on the client's problems. This approach is underpinned by counselling psychology's humanistic roots that emphasise the uniqueness of each person (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010).

Moreover, the research findings illustrate how women with bisexual attractions have over time moved towards having preferences for bisexual partners in building intimate and sexual relationships based on mutual values, and primarily due to their previously unsatisfying and unfulfilling experiences with heterosexual men and lesbian partners. These findings provide therapeutic practitioners with fresh insight into contemporary ways in which bisexual women are constructing their relationships, while highlighting the importance for the continuous need to keep up with changes that are occurring in this field. The findings also point out to the differences in constructing meanings around bisexual experiences in relationships based on



generational differences. Hence, it is important to take into account the historical context involved in the time and age of the individual's life that attribute to their constructions. The theory emerging from this study reflects but the beginning of an alternative way of viewing bisexual women's relationships that can be further enhanced and developed in future research.

Finally, and arguably, the therapy itself may further processes of negotiation in a different way through providing the space for clients narratives as another technique external to their relationships that further renders them intelligible. With bisexual women seeking therapy for relationship issues, the therapy model could be tailored to become a technique of its own. Such an approach goes in hand with counselling psychology's distinguishing character, in comparison to other psychotherapeutic models, which lies within its postmodern epistemological identity that emphasises the importance of bridging the gap between subjectivity and evidence-based practice (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010).

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## **Appendices**

### **A. Consent form**



### **ETHICS COMMITTEE**

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Research Project:**

**Bisexuality: An Exploration of Women's Relationships**

**Brief Description of Research Project:**

The proposed study aims at gaining knowledge about the dynamics of bisexual women's relationships. The data will be gathered via intensive interviewing of 18 women, aged 18 and above, who self-define as bisexual and have been in different types of relationships, such as heterosexual, homosexual, monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, in order to explore how their experiences may have been shaped based on the relationship type. Interviews will consist of open-ended questions that will last for approximately one hour and will be audio recorded. Participants may be asked to be interviewed again if necessary in order to collect further data to support the research. The interviews will be conducted at the organisation where the participant has been recruited for the research. Please be assured that anonymity will be maintained and any identifiable details will be changed so that you may not be recognised by anyone else, especially should the study's findings be published in academic journals. All disclosed material will remain confidential except in cases where serious harm to self or others is concerned, child abuse, drug trafficking and terrorism. You have the right to withdraw consent at any time without giving a reason. However, the data in aggregate form may still be used if consent is withdrawn after two months of the initial interview date. In order to withdraw you can contact the researcher, Joyce Chedid or the Director of Studies, Dr Diane Bray (find contact details below), by quoting your ID number on this form.

**Investigator Contact Details:**

Name: Joyce Chedid  
Department: Psychology  
University address: University of  
Roehampton  
London  
Postcode SW15 4JD  
Email:  
chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk  
Telephone: 075 316 60627

**Consent Statement:**

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact Dr. Lance Slade, Ethics Committee Deputy Chair, (or if the researcher is a student you can also contact the Director of Studies, Dr. Diane Bray.

**Director of Studies/ Head of Department Contact Details:**

Name: Dr Diane Bray  
University Address: University of Roehampton  
London  
SW15 4JD  
Email: d.bray@roehampton.ac.uk  
Telephone: +44 (0) 2083923627

**Ethics Committee Deputy Chair Contact Details:**

Name: Dr Lance Slade  
University Address: University of Roehampton  
London  
SW15 4JD  
Email: l.slade@roehampton.ac.uk  
Telephone: +44 (0) 2083923627

B. Flyer



## **Bisexuality: An Exploration of Women's Relationships**

*Female?*

*Aged 18 and above?*

*Have been in sexual and intimate relationships with women and men?*

**This study aims to explore bisexual women's different types of relationships, such as heterosexual, homosexual, monogamous and non-monogamous relationships.**

**The study will take place in the form of face-to-face interviews of one hour length at the organisation where you have found out about the project.**

**This research project is part of my doctoral course of Counselling Psychology at the University of Roehampton and has been approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee.**

**Your participation will be highly appreciated and of great value to the field of bisexuality and Counselling Psychology.**

**If you are interested in participating please contact the researcher, Joyce Chedid:**

**[chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk)**



## Bisexuality: An Exploration of Women's Relationships

*Have been in sexual and intimate relationships with women and men?*

**chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk**

[illegible]

## D. Organisation Letter



Organisation's Address

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Joyce Chedid and I am a student on the Counselling Psychology doctoral programme at the University of Roehampton. As part of my course and training I will be conducting a study titled 'Bisexuality: An Exploration of Women's Relationships'. The study aims to explore bisexual women's different types of relationships, such as heterosexual, homosexual, monogamous and non-monogamous relationships. The study will focus on the women's personal experiences of relationships and how they may be affected depending on the type of relationship they are or have been engaged in. This study hopes to generate theories to elucidate how bisexual women construct meaning of their experiences in the context of different types of relationships, which may contribute to therapist's understanding and ability to work more efficiently with this client group.

The data will be gathered via intensive interviewing of 18 women, aged 18 and above, who self-define as bisexual and have been in relationships with men and women, in order to explore how their experiences may have been shaped based on the relationship type. Interviews will consist of open-ended questions that will last for approximately one hour and will be audio recorded. Participants may be interviewed again if necessary in order to collect further data to support the research.

This project has been approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee. For more information you can contact the Director of Studies, Dr Diane Bray. Contact details:

Dr. Diane Bray  
Head of Psychology Department  
University of Roehampton  
London  
SW15 4JD  
[d.bray@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:d.bray@roehampton.ac.uk)  
Tel: +44 (0) 2083 923627

If you find that this research is of interest to your organisation and would approve the researcher to recruit participants through your organisation, you can contact me for further details:

Joyce Chedid  
Department of Psychology  
University of Roehampton  
Whitelands College  
Holybourne Avenue



London  
SW15 4JD  
[chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk)  
Tel: +44 (0) 7531 660627

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Joyce Chedid

## E. Eligibility and Demographics form



### Eligibility Questionnaire:

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. In order to ensure that you meet the requirements for this research study, please circle the appropriate answer:

1. Are you 18 years old or above?

Yes      No

2. Please indicate the age group you belong to:

- a) 18 - 25
- b) 26 - 35
- c) 36 - 45
- d) 46 - 55
- e) 55 - 65
- f) 65 +

3. Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Have you been in at least one sexual and intimate relationship with a woman?

Yes      No

5. If you have answered Yes to question 4, then what was the duration of your longest relationship? (If it's a current relationship then what is the duration up to this day)

- a) Less than a month
- b) 1 to 6 months
- c) 6 months to 1 year
- d) 1 to 5 years
- e) Over 5 years

6. Have you been in at least one sexual and intimate relationship with a man?

Yes      No

7. If you have answered Yes to question 6, then what was the duration of your longest relationship? (If it's a current relationship then what is the duration up to this day)
- a) Less than a month
  - b) 1 to 6 months
  - c) 6 months to 1 year
  - d) 1 to 5 years
  - e) Over 5 years
8. Have you trained as a therapist (any type of psychological therapy or counselling) or are currently in training?
- Yes    No
9. Are you currently receiving any type of therapy or counselling?
- Yes    No
10. Have you received any type of therapy or counselling in the past 6 months?
- Yes    No

## F. Participant Debriefing Form



### Debrief Sheet

Thank you for taking part in this research study.

Although you have had the chance at the end of the interview to discuss how you found the interview and any concerns that may have arisen as a result of participating, in the case of emotional distress that may have resulted from disclosing personal material, please find below the contact details of a list of organisations that you may seek for support. In addition, you may always contact your GP for support as well.

#### **Samaritans** (24 hour phone service)

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) (to find local branch visit website)

Tel: 08457 909090

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Postal address: Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

Chris

PO BOX 90 90

Stirling

FK8 2SA

#### **Pace**

[www.pacehealth.org.uk](http://www.pacehealth.org.uk)

Tel: 02077 001323

Email: [info@pacehealth.org.uk](mailto:info@pacehealth.org.uk)

Address: PACE

34 Hartham Road

London

N7 9JL

#### **Pink Therapy**

[www.pinktherapy.com](http://www.pinktherapy.com)

Tel: 02078 366647

Email: [admin@pinktherapy.com](mailto:admin@pinktherapy.com)

Address: Pink Therapy

BCM 5159

London

WC1N 3XX

Your participation in this study has been highly appreciated and very valuable in the field of bisexuality and Counselling Psychology. If you would like to receive a copy

of the findings of the research please provide an email address and I shall send them to you in due time. For any further queries please do not hesitate to contact the researcher or the Director of studies. If you would like to contact an independent party please contact Dr Lance Slade, Ethics Committee Deputy Chair.

Ethics Committee Deputy Chair: Dr Lance Slade  
Department of Psychology  
University of Roehampton  
London  
SW15 4JD  
[l.slade@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:l.slade@roehampton.ac.uk)  
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Director of Studies: Dr. Diane Bray  
Head of Psychology Department  
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Researcher: Joyce Chedid  
Department of Psychology  
University of Roehampton  
Whitelands College  
Holybourne Avenue  
London  
SW15 4JD  
[chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:chedidj@roehampton.ac.uk)  
Tel: [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Joyce Chedid

**G. Table of focused codes forming category 2**

<b>Focused Codes</b>	<b>Category 2: Prism of experiences; reflections through an-other</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiating between feelings towards male and female partners (based on realising main attraction towards women)</li> <li>• Differences in disclosing sexuality based on partner's gender</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiating feelings and behaviours between male and female partners (sharing female bodies, women understanding each other better, feminine qualities like sensitivity)</li> <li>• Disclosing sexuality influenced by partner's gender and sexuality</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking different emotional and sexual experiences from men and women (different bodies giving different sexual experiences) (different genders giving different emotional experiences)</li> <li>• Differentiating sexual experiences based on body differences</li> <li>• Emotional attraction process differing between men and women and changing</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choices of partners influenced by seeking feminine traits in men and regardless of gender; viewing gender roles as a continuum and preference for "in the middle"; no lesbian partners and finds transsexuals challenging</li> <li>• Experiencing bodies differently based on anatomy; liking different aspects in different bodies; nothing lacking in one or other</li> <li>• Accepting given gender by nature and nurture as female, but not ascribing to gender roles</li> <li>• Portraying dislike of gender roles and resistance towards society's normative views; contributing this to equality in her upbringing</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing bodily contact differently based on sexed differences</li> <li>• Having a common sexual need sought from all partners regardless of genders and sexed bodies</li> <li>• Changes in gender performances and roles with different partners</li> <li>• Responding to other people's gender presentation by experiencing more of her gender fluidity</li> <li>• Feelings of enjoyment and liberation in different gender expressions</li> <li>• Exploring gender yet maintaining gender roles through enacting them</li> <li>• Reflecting on her own biases and scripts of masculinity and femininity through exploration</li> <li>• Views and beliefs on gender compounded with upbringing experiences</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiating sexual and emotional experiences between men and women partners</li> <li>• Attributing differences to stereotypical views of women based on her young predominantly male environment</li> <li>• Attributing primary attraction to men to an engrained programming of procreation, childhood environment</li> </ul>

<b>Participant 7</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying gender as male based on body's anatomy, but feeling feminine traits in himself</li> <li>• Using the term feminine aspects based on others views</li> <li>• Viewing physical attraction as a consequence of emotional attraction with men and women</li> <li>• Experiencing the emotional attraction to men and women as equally strong</li> <li>• Differentiating connections between female and male partner and attributing it to different ways of knowing them and being with them</li> <li>• Experiencing his behaviour as the same whether with male or female partners</li> <li>• Finding that his experiences with women shows more compatibility in relation to ways of connecting than with gay men</li> <li>• Feeling more confident sexually with women than men, attributing this to more experiences with women</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 8</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiating between emotional and physical connections between men and women: ability to be casual sexually with a man but becoming emotionally involved quickly with women</li> <li>• Experiencing more emotional connection and physical intimacy with women quite quickly, whereas with men only when long term</li> <li>• Experiencing characteristics in relationships with women such as tenderness and gentleness and loving more than with men</li> <li>• Being more sexually submissive with men than women with whom there is more equal behaviour</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 9</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing women initially as sexually arousing only in context with men, fantasy and threesome</li> <li>• Being more submissive with women due to equality, more dominant with men (feminist politics)</li> </ul>

**H. Table of focused codes forming category 3**

<b>Focused Codes</b>	<b>Category 3: Process of partner selection</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effects of shared experiences on partner and relationship choices</li> <li>• Effects of own sexuality on partner and relationship choices and feelings</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender similarity creating shared experiences and understanding</li> <li>• Bisexuality viewed as threatening to male and female partners, straight and lesbian</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared experiences with partners creating understanding</li> <li>• Seeking partners of same sexuality, bisexual and polyamorous</li> <li>• Experiencing lesbian partners as possessive and threatened by bisexuality</li> <li>• Experiencing heterosexual men as threatened and objectifying of female bisexuals</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing different relationship styles, monogamous and polyamorous with individuals of different sexualities and genders</li> <li>• Behaving the same in gender roles regardless of partner's gender and differentiating feelings based on partner's personality not gender or sexuality</li> <li>• Effects of partners' sexuality on relationship; trying to make sense of self and others sexuality</li> <li>• Preference for same sexuality partner creating understanding; disclosing creating acceptance</li> <li>• Defining relationships differently based on partner's gender in past and sexuality at present</li> <li>• Influences of age on sexual identification and process of growing older, maturing, and experiences impacting on views and beliefs of self and relationships</li> <li>• Reasons or not for disclosure of sexuality and impacts on relationships, family and friends</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placing importance upon bisexual communities in relation to sense of belonging based on mutual understanding</li> <li>• Preferring bisexual and/queer identified partners due to shared understanding of gender and sexuality facilitating relationship communication and closeness/intimacy</li> <li>• Attributing partner choices to the "evolution of my own sexuality and identities and aging process"</li> <li>• Disclosing polyamory to partners</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relating choice of bisexual partners and preference based on</li> </ul>



	<p>her experiences, networks of friends and relationships evolving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explaining shift from heterosexual friends to more bisexual and open minded friends due to sexuality</li> <li>• Emphasising other aspects in marriage such as good parenting and shared understanding as overriding to what others think of them sexually</li> <li>• Sharing more openness and understanding with bisexual individuals facilitating communication and decreasing risk of judgmental rejection</li> <li>• Explaining that partner's openness and sexuality attributes to honesty in marriage</li> <li>• Feeling lucky to share common appreciation of another person, physique or brain or humour, with her husband</li> <li>• Realising she's attracted more by people because of there personal qualities rather than gender despite being 70/30, and noticing the contradiction</li> <li>• Feeling it's the self-awareness they chose to have as a key factor in personality for choice of partner</li> <li>• Finding sexuality as non determining factor and openness to different sexualities in men and women</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 7</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being in mainly non-monogamous relationships</li> <li>• Describing different relationship experiences between straight women partners, gay male partners, and bisexual male and female partners</li> <li>• Finding most compatibility with female and male bisexual partners and attributing this to shared understandings facilitating communication</li> <li>• Relating more successful relationships with individuals who had experienced non-monogamy</li> <li>• Attributing all current partner's sexualities as bisexual, to facilitating all relationships and friendships due to shared understandings</li> <li>• Viewing his experiences bisexual men's approaches towards relationships as varying, some beginning with sexual connections and others with emotional</li> <li>• Finding it more common in his experiences to be able to begin an emotional connection with a bisexual man than with a gay man</li> <li>• Disclosing bisexual identity very early on due to experiences with gay men not showing interest once they know</li> </ul>
<b>Participant 8</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning gender after involvement in bisexual community and supported by partner</li> <li>• Having relationships mainly with bisexual people due to more openness, understanding and no judgement about sexuality and polyamory</li> <li>• Making decisions regarding parenting and sexuality and relationships styles</li> <li>• Experiencing having a third partner as energising her current</li> </ul>

	relationship
<b>Participant 9</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning attraction to women at late age in relation to menopause</li> <li>• Experiencing exclusion from lesbians and lesbian/bi community</li> </ul>